

MACABRE CADAVER

A Magazine of Speculative Fiction, Art and Poetry

Issue 4, November 2008

ISSN 1942-8693



FICTION:

Jeremy Kelly	Carlos Hernandez
Tonia Brown	Eric Turowski
Carl R. Moore	Lawrence Buentello
Joshua Scribner	Florence Ann Marlowe
Catherine J Gardner	

POETRY:

Keaton Foster
Chad Alsop

ART:

Matt Truiano
Ricardo Delgado

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MACABRE CADAVER MAGAZINE
ISSUE #4

A MESSAGE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Welcome to Issue 4, November 2008 of Macabre Cadaver, a monthly online magazine that publishes speculative fiction, art, and poetry. We would like to welcome Jeff Woodward, our new editor, aboard. Welcome to Macabre Cadaver, Jeff, and thanks for your hard work. Also, we are excited to announce that we will soon be selecting stories to be published in our first anthology by our associated imprint, Stark Raven Press.

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Macabre Cadaver Logo Font (Nosfer) by:

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www.nulldevice.com

ISSN 1942-8693



FICTION

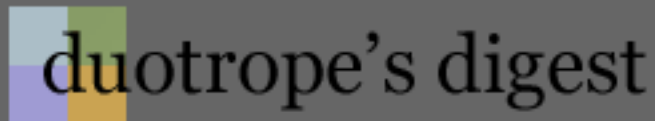
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THE CROP BEARER

by Jeremy Kelly

June 14th, 2014. 11:45pm

Abraham,

I hope this finds you well and New Manchester thriving. The Transporter, who was placed in charge of our shipment to you, as well as this correspondence, is called Cunningham – authorization code: 255CHARLIE. He sticks to the mountains and we use him regularly.

This shipment should have left Ash City at 2am, June 15th. The truck should arrive in New Manchester by 8:30am, June 15th.

The shipment contains the wool you asked for, seven barrels of spring water from the city wells and two pallets of coal. And the mail, of course. As agreed upon at our last transaction, we require three pallets of grain and rice and any steel you might spare. We trust Cunningham to take responsibility for the shipment back to Ash City.

Ash City is disease-free for the most part. The cold air up here is good for our lungs. We do not see much Outside activity when the sun goes down. Our scientists think that this may have something to do with the chill in the air.

Three deaths this past month. Jasmine Sanchez, 73, died of natural causes. Eckert Droll, 40, Daytrader, snuck into the city from the Outside for a wild night and was killed in a drunken brawl with the Guard outside the bar room. Thomas Carter, 3, fell down one of the wells and drowned. The water has been tested and remains uncontaminated.

One birth in the past month! To the Daultry family a baby girl! They have named her Rosanna.

No leavings.

One entry. This concerns you Abraham, or New Manchester rather. She's a young girl by the name of Maggie Pate. She said she comes from New Manchester. According to the guard who first noticed her, she just wandered out of the woods up to the city wall in the dead of night! That is to say, Abraham that she came to us from the Outside unguarded and filthy –

on her own.

Now we all know good and well that most on the Outside cannot survive a day without being robbed, murdered, or infected. How could a child survive out there? As of the date of this correspondence, we have her in quarantine where she will stay until we have firmly established that she is free of infection.

I have enclosed a transcript of her initial interview with Doc Hansen, whom you met on your last visit. You will want to read it – she is just a child - but there are some hefty allegations made against the Village Council of New Manchester. Also, if her story was ever made available to our citizens or yours, it could potentially compromise the Transportation Program.

Please enclose return correspondence and trust it with Cunningham. Let us know what to do about Maggie Pate.

All the Best of Luck and Life,

Heather Lambert
Village Council
Ash City, Carolina
“City Built on a Mountain of Hope”
(Near the Intersection of Old Routes' 26 and 40)

Ash City
Entries Division
Quarantine Department

June 1st, 2014. 7:20am.

The following is a transcript of an interview that occurred between myself, Doctor Joseph Hansen, and a young girl from New Manchester who wandered up to the wall unguarded on the night of May 29th, 2014. The girl identifies herself as Maggie Pate. She has experienced direct contact with the Outside. Her vital signs are stable and there were no signs of infection upon her arrival.

Subject Name: Maggie Pate

Kin: Jonathan “John” Pate, William “Billy” Pate, Stuart Pate.

Date of Arrival: May 29th, 2014. 3:45am.

City of Origin: New Manchester

Description: Our Quarantine Interview room is standard. White padded walls, concrete floor and one wooden chair in the center of the room facing the window into the control area.

Upon entering the interview room, subject is visible through the glass. Subject walks across room and sits in the chair and stares down at the floor. She looks tired and frightened. She may be experiencing shock. She is wearing jeans and a shirt, both covered in grime. Her face and hands are smudged with dirt. She has curly red hair that is matted with mud. According to the nurses, there appears to be substantial amounts of dried blood on her scalp. She has no visible head trauma, however. I begin the interview process.

Doc Hansen: Maggie? Maggie Pate? [Subject lifts head. No verbal response.] Maggie, I'm Doctor Hansen. Hello.

Maggie Pate: Hello.

Doc Hansen: How are you feeling this morning?

Maggie Pate: Hungry. [Perhaps subject is showing possible signs of infection?]

Doc Hansen: Hungry? Is it an intense hunger, a craving? Are you experiencing severe loss of concentration? Do have you have full control over bodily functions -?

Maggie Pate: I don't know. I'm just hungry. Do you have a sandwich? [Never mind.]

Doc Hansen: I think we can arrange that. [I signal to the nurse.] You've been through a lot out there in the woods, I'm sure.

Maggie Pate: Yeah.

Doc Hansen: Maggie. Can you tell me what happened out there? How you got out there? How you arrived here? Can you talk to me about that?

Maggie Pate: I guess so. It's not a very happy story.

Doc Hansen: That's ok. These days, I'm used to not-very-happy stories. I'd like to hear it – and it will help me get you out of here. There's your sandwich. [A slot has opened in the wall of the interview room and a plate is slid onto the floor. The slot closes. Subject removes herself from the chair, walks across the room and picks the sandwich up off of the plate. She leaves the plate on the floor and returns to the chair. She takes a small bit out of the sandwich and looks up at the window towards me.]

Maggie Pate: You want me to start at the beginning?

Doc Hansen: Yes, please Maggie. Start at the beginning.

Maggie Pate: Ok. Well...

We were from New Manchester. My father had been hoarding gasoline for as long as I could remember. He kept it in the cellar, sealed up in just about anything he could find. Plastic gallon water jugs, old paint cans, recycled water tanks, even little mason jars. They took up every available space on the cellar floor. We kept the cellar door lock and bolted at all times with a towel stuffed under the door jamb to block the fumes, but the whole house still reeked of gasoline. I would get very sick sometimes. So my brothers and I spent the majority of our time hanging around John's shop.

My father's name was John Pate. We called him John instead of papa.

Why would you do that?

It was always this way, since I learned to talk. John did a good job of looking after us, but he wasn't the most affectionate person. He certainly liked to keep his distance from me. I asked Billy why once, and he said that he did that in case, well, in case something bad ever happened to me. Billy thought that John just couldn't take that. So he stayed away. Maybe it was easier.

John was a mechanic by trade, the best in New Manchester. He traded the majority of his work for gasoline by the gallon or the quart. Gasoline was hard to come by in New Manchester unless you're a Transporter.

Well it's the same here, Maggie. You know, you're pretty young to know about gasoline and Transporters.

Well, I practically grew up in John's shop. It was our way of life. It was all about the gasoline. My main chore was to go out into the streets and scavenge for anything we might carry it in. I'd go through people's trash or the dumpster behind the bar room. Now, those are the kids to worry about what they know or don't. Those poor bar room kids with all their parents so sad and miserable. They'd just sit out on the curb all day, filthy, getting knocked around by all the drunks, peering inside the door waiting for their mothers and fathers to come stumbling out into the street. Sometimes they'd wait all day. Sometimes they'd wait in the rain. Thank goodness John was never particular to the bar room. My brothers neither.

Gasoline was John's life. I guess he sort of made it ours too. We all slept in the shop, so I saw a lot. He never turned a job down, which brought in a lot of night busi-

ness from those who didn't want to be seen or caught. It was business that was undesirable to everyone else in New Manchester, especially to the Village Council. They were furious about the company John kept at night and spoke badly of him at village meetings. One of the council members visited the shop once. I was underneath old Mr. Flint's rice burner pickup helping Billy change the oil. The council member was angry with John. He said: "Why, John Pate, must you keep those in your shop at night that may do the people of your city considerable harm?"

John just shrugged his shoulders. "Because they pay better than you, Abraham," he replied. "And they pay in gas."

What kind of customers did your father take in at night? Daytraders. Transporters.

[Subject's father appeared to be involved in criminal activity; probably involved with smuggling supplies for Daytraders. Willfully harboring Daytraders or any other pirates within city walls is a criminal offence. Perhaps subject was traded for payment and ended up abandoned on the Outside.]

Is that how you ended up here, Maggie? Did one of these Daytraders take you away from New Manchester?

God, no. That would have never happened. We were too close, in our separate ways. We always looked out for each other. My family had a pact: "Always watch out for each other. Always." No, John would have never let a Daytrader get his hands on me. He proved it.

Do you understand that your father was harboring and willfully aiding pirates?

Yeah. I know. But, like he said, they paid well and they paid in gas. If I didn't know they were pirates at first, I found out soon enough just by the way they looked and smelled and talked.

The Daytraders looked like they lived on the road, because they did. They'd bribe their way into the city, or sneak in, or bust in and bring their vehicles to John's shop on their way to the bar room. They were like wolves on a chain in John's shop. They had a very difficult time dealing with a normal person without killing and robbing them. John developed a reputation with the Daytraders over the years, however, and they respected him as much as a Daytrader could respect anything. And, since the pirates lived on the Outside mostly, word got around. Daytraders from all over began to come to New Manchester for a tune up, and they'd trade gas that they had ripped

off or robbed from people for the work. I guess it was sort of ruining life for people, but we needed the gas.

Y'know what I remember most about a Daytrader? You can always tell a Daytrader by the way he's missing things that most other people have.

Like what?

Like fingers. Hands. Arms. Feet.

Ah. Well. It's the life they choose, Maggie. The risk of infection on the Outside is one hundred times that of someone who lives within city walls. Many of the Daytraders suffer infection. The only way to prevent death, or becoming one of the Affected, is to perform an immediate amputation.

The Transporters were never missing anything. And they live on the Outside. They always came at night. I was more nervous about them than those Daytraders. At least the Daytraders were... people.

I don't follow. What was it exactly that frightened you about the Transporters?

You'd hear stories. I should have listened. Do you see anyone else walk around in the daytime covered from head to foot in hoods and black masks and goggles and gloves? Even when it's hot outside they do that. In the middle of the night, when they'd pull their big tractor trailers into John's shop, they'd take the masks and goggles off. They all looked related. They all had these very pale thin faces and this long knotted black hair. When they looked at you it burned. Like they were looking... into you. I... I should have listened.

[NOTE: Subject appears to know a little too much about those directly involved in our Transportation Program. Usually, within city walls we can not only protect our citizens from what could do them direct physical harm on the Outside, but also shelter them psychologically from KNOWING things that could damage their spirits as well. Subject appears to have been overexposed to Outside elements, so to speak, in her father's shop in New Manchester.]

... They had this aura around them whenever they were near. This incredible cold strength. It drew from you. Pulled you in. It's... hard for me to explain, even harder for me to understand. They had this accent when they spoke, like this antique English language that died long ago. Like their words were made underground. They said strange things to me in John's shop. Once, one of them called me "young crop-bearer." I didn't know what that meant so I asked Billy later. He told me he didn't know, but I think he might've been lying because he shivered when I said it. He told me to forget about it, to never

speak of it again. But I didn't forget. And now, I have a pretty good idea of what that meant, and I'm sure Billy wouldn't mind me telling you now.

What do you think the term "crop bearer" means?

I think it has something to do with me growing up. Y'know, into a woman. And it means that when I am a woman I will bear children into the world. But I don't think it's for the right reasons.

Well, Maggie. You are right about one thing. When the Transporter called you "crop bearer", he was paying you respect for being female. It is part of the Transporters' ideology. They have concocted and follow their own peculiar religion, but it is an honorable one. They hold women on the highest pedestal because they alone hold the key to bearing fruit to the world. They are the bearers of children that will grow into healthy adults. One day, the planet will repopulate itself with healthy human beings and the healthy will outnumber the Affected. The Affected will die off or a cure shall be found, and we shall live free again. So you see it IS for the right reasons.

The Transporters have been around since before the Outbreak. They are the only ones who have undertaken the great task of keeping humanity alive and in contact with one another by carrying the mail and transporting supplies from one settlement to the next. They are our benefactors in a way. Their dress may be strange, their path to worship a little extreme, perhaps. But, they are out there saving our lives every day.

Saving our lives. For what?

[Time to redirect my line of questioning. I can already recommend that Subject be held in quarantine until we can re-teach her what we feel she needs to believe in order to interact with the citizens of Ash City, or any city, for that matter.]

After the interview, Maggie, we will get you some literature to read and some people to talk to so you can feel a little more at ease about our benefactors and the state of the world. Realize that the true enemy in the world today is the Disease, and we are all it's victims in our separate ways. The direct purpose of this interview is to discover how exactly where you came from and how you ended up here. Do you remember the date you left New Manchester?

It was the day after my birthday.

When is your birthday?

May 2nd.

[My god. Subject has been on the Outside for almost a month!]

Why did you leave?

On my birthday John gathered us together in the shop and told us that we had enough gasoline and that we were leaving for Ash City the following morning. It was no secret why he was hiding gasoline – he thought my mother was still alive. He wanted to find her. We were separated from her during the Outbreak. John believed she may have made it. Made it to Ash City. I don't remember her – I was very young when the Outbreak... Well, Y'know.

Why did your father believe that your mother was in Ash City? Why not some of the other settlements in Georgia? Why not Atlantic station? Or Decatur City?

Because people talked. And sent mail. The Daytraders intercepted mail all the time. Word got around that she might be in Ash City. Or farther north. That's why we needed so much gas. If we made it to Ash City and she wasn't there, we needed enough to keep going north until he found her.

We spent my birthday packing up the truck. John outfitted that truck with everything: big tires with thick treads, steel roll bars, fog lamps, a tow hook and winch. He rebuilt the engine too. He attached a big platform trailer to the back of the truck to carry the extra gasoline. John and Billy spent the day and most of the night with paper face masks on, going down into the cellar of the house to bring all the gasoline up into the shop where they transferred it into these big recycled water tanks John had traded for work from the Village Council. The tanks went up into the trailer. I fell asleep late.

When I woke up the next morning, we were already on the road. I was wedged in between John and my brother Stuart in the cab of the truck. John had a pistol in his lap. Stuart had a short rifle pointed out the window. Billy was behind me in the bed of the truck with the long rifle. He was looking the back the way we came and I looked with him. I saw the spiraling black smoke from the gate fires of New Manchester falling off of the road behind us. It was a chilly morning and John had me wrapped up in my blanket from the shop bed.

We traveled along some old country roads until we hit what used to be one of the main highways. We stayed on that until the plains became hills. When the hills became mountains, we got off into the country again on one of those long winding stretches of abandoned road. The signs were everywhere – signs that we used to live on the Outside before the Outbreak. Abandoned cars on the

highway, empty houses and storefronts, all vacant with doors open wide. Some of the cars on the road had weeds growing up out of the dashboards. Others were burnt out by fires. I noticed that all of the gas caps were opened – a sign of the Daytraders, I guess.

I had never left New Manchester before in my life that I can remember. I was born before the Outbreak but I don't remember that. For a part of the world that everyone had told me was extremely dangerous, everything seemed so quiet and tranquil to me on the Outside at first. The trees and grass were lush and green. Everything was in bloom. I saw many different types of flowers and colors I had never seen before. It was like the entire place, y'know, was without our footsteps. Untouched. I thought that it was the most beautiful land I had ever seen.

John did mention that what was different now was that it was more difficult to hear or see wildlife. There were no bird songs or squirrels. Just the whisper of the grass and the trees. I asked John where all the little animals might be, if they were all dead. He said no, that they were just hiding. I asked him what they were hiding from but he did not answer. And it was a silly question because I think I already knew deep down. And if I didn't, I found out soon enough.

Once off the highway the road grew narrow and winding with sharp inclines as we began to get up into the mountains. The truck was working hard to pull the trailer with all the extra weight of the gasoline, but John had rebuilt that engine himself and it maintained. He was a good mechanic.

We came upon a long stretch of road where we could see all the way downhill and up the next crest. At the crest's peak, just on the horizon, I saw a large black shape moving along the road. I tugged on John's shirt and pointed. He looked and slowed the truck down to a stop. Stuart hung out the window with the short rifle and squinted. I could tell he was getting nervous. He was always nervous and totally against the idea of making that trek from the start. He asked John "what the hell" the thing was. John looked back at Billy and Billy nodded quietly and rose to his feet in the back of the truck. There was a scope on the long rifle and Billy used it to glass the crest of the next hill and the mysterious shape in the distance.

"It's a bear," Billy said and my heart just about jumped up into my throat. There were only a couple moments in my life where I actually felt like a little girl, and this was one of them. A bear! I had only seen and read about

them in books and had never seen one up close before. I even thought that maybe they were extinct by now. I was nervous given our situation. I looked up into John's face for some sort of sign as to whether be excited or afraid.

John looked down and smiled at me and said, "Let's take a look." I would have jumped up and down if I had the room. John rolled the truck down the hill in neutral, tapping the breaks as quietly as he could so as not to rankle the bear into running off into the woods. The momentum of the downhill slope carried us halfway up the next before John had to shift gears again and apply the gas. We stopped twenty yards or so from the bear and it turned to face us directly. He was cute. He stuck his nose up in the air and sniffed at us, trying to figure out what we were doing. He did not seem to be too muddled from our presence. I had my nose pressed up against the windshield – I was fascinated. John said it was a Black Bear. Billy kept the long rifle trained on him just in case he got out of sorts. Stuart darted his head back and forth, this way and that, looking extremely agitated. He told John we shouldn't be stopped for so long. He was always nervous.

John asked me, then, probably for the first time in my life, what I thought. So I told him. I told him it was the most fantastic thing I had ever seen and I asked him if we could get it to follow us all the way to Ash City. He said we probably didn't have enough food or daylight for that. He started talking about all the bears and other animals he had seen out in the woods when his father used to take him camping and hunting – when he was a child, long before the Outbreak. He was in mid-sentence as he glanced at his side view mirror. He stopped short and put his hand on the pistol in his lap.

"Billy," he said. "Behind us." I turned and looked behind us too, through Billy's legs. There was a figure of a man on the road quite a distance away, where we came from. It was the figure of a man, but... it didn't move the way a man moves. He was all hunched over and his head shook real violent-like from side to side. The clothes hung in rags from his body. There was something dark all over his face, chin, and chest. Like dirt, or mud. He was a long way away. He was waving his arms. Not at us, but every which way, like he had no control over them. His eyes were blood-red. He was there and then, in an instant, he was gone. He had run from one side of the road to the other and disappeared into the trees.

A loud crack went off above me and made me jump.

Billy had fired the long rifle. I looked ahead at the bear and saw that it was startled. It began to shuffle away from us, off the road. As the animal moved, I noticed it dragging its hind leg behind it. John slammed on the gas and the truck lurched forward, barely missing the limping bear. As we passed it on the road, I caught a glance at its hind quarters – a huge chunk of flesh was missing from its flank above the useless hind leg. I told John that the bear was hurt but he paid no attention. He just told me to turn around and sit down. “NOW.” So I did, until we were a fair distance away. I turned to get one more glimpse from the way we came and saw the bear on the horizon, still on the road. It was surrounded by a group of men. The same like the one before. The sick ones. They were waving their arms around, howling... screaming. One of them lurched forward and threw up something all over himself and the road. Another bent down and put his face in it. The bear had nowhere to move, and it looked like it lacked the energy to put up much of a fight. Poor bear. I asked John what the people were going to do, but he didn’t answer. Billy had his rifle trained on the scene behind us and called back to John that he could probably get a good shot off and put the animal out of its misery. John called back “NO” and said that a bullet wouldn’t kill him from that range anyway, and that it would just alert more attention to us.

Just as that nightmare on the hill fell out of view entirely, I saw one of the sick men jump on the bear’s back. Then another. And another, until they were swarming all over the animal like flies. I got sick to my stomach and very frightened at the same time. Billy turned to look at me in the rear window and tapped his finger against the glass. He was mouthing the words “Sit down.” So I did, finally. And I began to cry.

[Subject is sniffing, wiping tears from her eyes – has stopped eating sandwich, but she still has food in her mouth and it seems that the Affected have made full use of their predatory abilities. They now play a direct role in the natural balance. This is extremely interesting. I am curious to understand what happens when another species is infected.]

Are you thirsty, Maggie?

Yes.

Would you like some water?

Has it been boiled?

This is Ash City, Maggie. We are known to trade our spring water from the city wells in the mountain. It’s perfectly safe and very good, actually. You’ve probably drank water

in New Manchester that was transported from Ash City.

Alright.

[I signal to the nurse.]

Do you understand what those men were? The sick ones?

I do now. They came again, before our trip was done. They are the Affected, the ones on the Outside who got sick off of the Outbreak. The ones that all the walls in New Manchester were built to keep out. The ones that get the Daytraders sometimes. Make them lose limbs. They are the reason we have the Transporters go from city to city, instead of ourselves.

That’s right. You are lucky to be alive, little girl. You said that they came again – what happened? Where is your family now?

Later on in the afternoon we came to a point where the road was completely blocked by an overturned tractor trailer. A Transporter rig. But there was no Transporter. As we slowed to a stop, we were ambushed by Daytraders – they came out of the trees and from around the Transporter rig. They told us to get out of the truck. There was a lot of yelling. John pushed me down into the floorboard. I squeezed my eyes shut. They yelled at Stuart because he wouldn’t get out of the truck and he wouldn’t put down his rifle. He just kept screaming. So they shot him and all his blood got into my hair...

[That’s where the blood in the subject’s scalp comes from. A glass of water is deposited within the interview room.]

...They dragged Stuart and Herman and I and threw us on the ground next to my father in front of the truck. Billy dropped the rifle and got down next to us on his own. John had his pistol tucked away in his shirt and I know Billy had one too. My father began to shout at one of the Daytrader’s standing on top of the overturned trailer. They knew each other by name.

Come again?

What?

What was it you said...? That they knew each other?

Yeah. The Daytrader’s name was Rory Tobin. Once I got a good look at him, I remembered him too, from John’s shop a few months before. I remembered him because of his one shifty eye and his dirty white eye patch.

John called Rory Tobin out by name and was angry at him for shooting Stuart. Stuart was hit in the shoulder and lay unconscious on the pavement with his head in my lap. Rory Tobin apologized, but I don’t think he was really all that sorry.

“If you take my gasoline, my kids are going to die out

here,” said John. “After all I’ve done for you and your crew.”

The next part I remember well. Rory Tobin said: “It is what it is, John. The folks in New Manchester really didn’t want y’all to come back. If you do get out of this, I wouldn’t head back there. You’d just be disappointed in what the human race can do to one another.”

And John said, “They tipped you off?! The Village Council?!” His face turned a deep shade of red, almost purple. He was real mad.

Rory Tobin said: “It’s ironic, John. They’ve literally thrown you to the wolves you were feeding on their doorstep.”

My stomach dropped then as I realized what had happened. For the business my father conducted with criminals, New Manchester had condemned us to death by making their own deal. Rory Tobin spoke again.

“Y’know John,” he said. “You could join us. You really are a great mechanic and you’re oldest there looks pretty tough. And the girl. Y’know, we could use her... she’ll be a woman soon.” Some of the other Daytraders began to laugh. I looked up at Rory Tobin because I knew he was talking about me. I didn’t quite know what he meant, but I knew that it wasn’t good. His lips were curled in this nasty smile, but as I looked on the smile faded and his brows furrowed. All of a sudden, something had made him angry. I looked back at my father and brother above me, and... my world turned upside down forever.

[Subject has stopped talking. Her head is down. She is sobbing quietly.]

Maggie, do you need to take a break?

[No reply]

Let’s take a break.

* * *

June 1st. 5:15pm.

[Have checked city records and found that there is, in fact, a Melissa Pate living within the walls of Ash City. This may be the subject’s mother or relative. I have notified neither of one another’s existence just yet – this is a complicated situation that involves some considerable allegations toward the Village Council of New Manchester. What we have here, essentially, is a girl who knows too much, whose father was blacklisted for taking in criminals. I am failing to see a reasonable way out of this interview that ends up with the

girl released back into the public sector. The decision overall should be made a joint effort between the Village Councils of Ash City and New Manchester.]

[Upon entry into the interview room, subject MAGGIE PATE appears calm and composed. She looks up at me as she sits down.]

Feeling better, Maggie?

Yes.

Did you get some rest?

No.

Are you hungry? Thirsty? Can I do anything to make you feel more comfortable?

No.

I know that it is hard here in the quarantine department, but talking about all this is going to help you get out of here. Do you understand?

Yes.

Do you think you can carry on where you left off?

[Subject looks down at the floor.]

I turned to look back at my father and brother above me. As my head turned, Bill stopped me by pressing the barrel of the pistol he was hiding against my forehead. Between my eyes. My own brother. He wouldn’t look at me as he did this. He just looked straight up at Rory Tobin with a face chiseled from stone. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. I tried to suck in air, but it turned into a long horrible sob. My shoulders began to shake. I pissed myself. I loved my brother and for the first time, I was unexpectedly terrified of him as well. I glanced at my father then, only to find that he too held a hidden pistol and was pointing it at Billy’s head.

John said to Rory Tobin: “Take the truck, Rory Tobin. Take the gas. But you will not have my children.”

I had heard John and my brothers speak of this very moment late in the night back in New Manchester, when they thought I was sleeping. They spoke of what must be done if our family ever came under irreparable harm—whether it was from the Affected, Daytraders, or Disease. “Always watch out for each other. Always.” They made a pact. This was, I realized, the last resort. My own brother was going to execute me because he believed that there were fates for me worse than death.

Rory Tobin sneered. “I am willing to compromise, John Pate. But do not push me. I will take your truck and your gas. But I will have one of you as well, or I’ll kill ALL of you now.”

“Then take the boy,” John said, pointing to Stuart who

lay in my lap, unconscious. I realized later that it was Stuart's only chance for survival. A wounded man on the Outside wouldn't last the night. "He's a good mechanic."

Rory Tobin laughed. "Very well, John," he said. "I'll take the runt and leave the rest of you to die out here. If the Affected or the Disease doesn't get you first, the Transporter will. There's one on the loose out there somewhere. This is his rig – we ran him off last night so we could use the truck to block the road and run into you. Not before he got a few of my guys though. This is why I'll settle for the runt, John Pate. I need the body."

[The Transportation registry should be checked over the next few weeks to determine that all Transporters and shipments are accounted for.]

They took Stuart. They took the gasoline, the truck. Everything. The only thing they left us was each other, the pistols, and a gallon of gasoline in a plastic water jug.

We spent the night in the overturned trailer, in the dark, with the doors secured from the inside. It was pitch black. I sat away from Billy and John as best as I could, but I couldn't see them. I was terrified, confused. All night I peered into the gloom to see if one of them were pointing a gun at me. I was exhausted too, but I couldn't sleep. During the night I heard sniffing and scratching around the walls and door of the trailer, and I heard the pitter patter of rapid, directionless footsteps outside. It made the thought of rest unbearable.

After what felt like days, the morning light filtered in through the crack between the trailer doors. We opened the doors and stepped outside. We were cautious, but there was nothing. I couldn't believe we made it through the night. John and Billy looked wide-eyed, filthy and exhausted. John said that we needed to get off the road, so we walked into the trees and up into the mountain. Once far enough away from the road, we followed it from the trees. I was hungry, but Billy said we couldn't eat anything out there.

John didn't allow us to stop and rest the entire day. We just kept walking and walking. My feet were wet. By nightfall, I was starving and shivering, but we kept going. After a while, I couldn't feel my own footsteps.

We began to hear things moving in the forest behind us. The snapping of branches, the rustling of leaves. I was trailing behind Billy and John when the racket began but, as it grew louder and closer, Billy fell behind me.

We walked faster through the darkness. The full moon was out and cast long shadows along the mountain forest floor. Our footsteps became more stumbling and frantic as we tried to get away from what was trailing behind. When I glanced back at Billy, I saw the undergrowth shift with moving shapes behind him. Flailing limbs in the moonlight. A muffled snarl. In moments the noise grew until it was in the shadows of the forest all around us. It made us stop in our tracks. We had nowhere to go. Nowhere to run. I stood between John and Billy as they pointed their pistols at the trees, searching for something to shoot at in the darkness. Then a strong wind blew all the branches of leaves around us into frenzy – Billy started shooting. There was a great howling all around us. As the blowing wind crested. I felt something brush past me. Then, I felt cold strong arms around me lifting me and carrying me fast away from my family and up into the trees.

Up into the trees? How on Earth did you get up there?

It was the Transporter. I couldn't see him until he had me because he was dressed all in black, and he wore his thick black mask over his face. He grabbed me and leapt into the trees before John even had the chance to call out my name.

The Transporter held me so tight against the trunk of the tree that I had trouble breathing. He engulfed me his presence. His presence was icy cold – I Was colder then than I ever have been. I couldn't move my arms and my legs dangled freely into the air. I could twist my neck just far enough to look down upon John and Billy. My brother was calling my name.

The howling below grew into a wild shrieking as the wave of noise enclosed upon my family on the ground below. Billy and John were back to back firing their guns into the trees around them as the forms of the Affected became entirely visible in the moonlight. John stopped firing then and turned to Billy and told him he loved him. Billy turned just as John raised the gun to Billy's head. I started to scream, but the Transporter's hand was clenched tight over my mouth before I could get anything out. Then the Affected engulfed them. They grabbed my father just as the gun went off. Billy grabbed his neck and fell to the ground. My father called my name as four or five of the sick men dragged him off into the underbrush. In an instant, John was gone.

Suddenly, the Transporter left me clinging to a tree branch and drifted down towards the forest floor. I

gasped for breath and felt dizzy – his grasp was tight and unflinching. As he left me, I gulped down air in huge mouthfuls. When the spots left my eyes, I looked down at my brother.

The Transporter was standing over Billy, who lay on the ground bleeding to death from the wound in his neck. The Affected came at them in savage droves, kicking, screaming, slashing, and biting. They were trying to get at Billy and drag him off into the trees. But the Transporter was like a wall between the diseased mob and my brother. He fought them off in such a way as I never imagined possible. He defied gravity and showed super strength as he sent each of them flying back into the brush and the darkness with powerful blows from his fists and feet. The howling grew faint as he finished them off and after what seemed like hours they stopped coming altogether. When it was over, the Transporter stood alone over Billy among a twisted heap of mangled corpses in the leaves around them.

Billy had been saved from the Disease, but he didn't look good. He had lost a lot of blood from the wound in his neck where my father had shot him. My father was gone. Forever changed. Probably already roaming the mountainside, sick with the Disease.

So, the Transporter saved you from the Affected, and saved your brother as well.

No. Only me.

Your brother didn't make it. I'm sorry.

Yeah, me too. My family was all so adamant about looking out for each other, even if it meant taking each other's lives to avoid being transformed into mindless freaks or being dragged around by Daytraders. But they still managed to leave me all alone. You would think, wouldn't you, that with all that fighting maybe the Transporter could have saved my brother for me. But he didn't. He had his own agenda.

How do you mean?

Billy didn't bleed to death. The life was sucked out of him.

I don't follow...

The Transporter. The Transporter killed my brother.

I don't think so, Maggie. You were still up in the tree, right?

Right.

Perhaps your vision was obscured. It seemed that your brother was on the brink of death as the fight ended. The Transporter was only trying to help.

He was helping himself. You weren't there.

He saved you and he saved your brother from a fate worse than death. You just told me the whole story. The Transporters are here to help us. Not to take our lives.

He told me.

What?

He told me that he killed Billy.

Maggie, it was a traumatic time. Let's move on to how you got here. Was it the Transporter that...?

Listen. I'm not crazy. After the fight, he took off that horrible black mask. His face was thin. He looked down at Billy. As the life fled from the wound at my brother's neck into the dirt, he spoke in a whisper but I could read his lips. He was thanking the Transporter. The Transporter knelt down beside him then, held his arms and bent over him, burying his face in my brother's neck. Billy's feet kicked at the dirt as he struggled weakly to break free of the Transporter's grasp. His eyes went blank and cold as he finally caught a glimpse of me up in the tree and died. The Transporter stood up and looked at me as well. His mouth and chin were covered in Billy's blood. He was back up into the trees in an instant, clapping his hand over my mouth and bringing me back down to the ground. He told me that he killed Billy, told me that Billy was going to die anyway and that his death was a waste otherwise. He gagged me and tied a thick cord around my wrists and dragged me away into the undergrowth.

The Transporter didn't talk much. He only let me stop to rest a few times. We walked forever. He called me "young crop-bearer" when he did speak to me at all, like the other one did back in New Manchester. As he led me through the mountains for days and days, I began to come to grips with what the Transporters really are.

They're not here just to save us from the Disease. They're here to save us for themselves. If the Disease destroys the human race, the Transporters would run out of blood to feed upon. But, he wouldn't harm me. One day I would grow up to bear children. As a woman I would raise my own little crop for the Transporters to feed upon.

He led me through the mountains, right up to the edge of town. He pushed me towards the city walls and waited in the trees until I was spotted by the Guard. Then he left me and disappeared back into the mountains.

Maggie, we're going to stop there. That's quite enough for the day. I want you to go back to your cell and try and get some rest, okay? We will speak again tomorrow and we'll see about getting you out of here, then. Ok?

Ok.

[End of Interview]

Dr. Joseph Hansen.
Entries Division.

* * *

June 16th, 2014. 5:00pm

Heather,

I hope this finds you well, your city at peace. I have returned Cunningham to you with the shipment you requested – authorization code: 422DELTA.

The shipment will leave New Manchester at 7:00pm, June 16th, and arrive in Ash City no later than 2:00am, June 17th.

Thank you for your shipment to us. We dreadfully needed the water.

As I have read in your correspondence, you have acquired Maggie Pate from New Manchester. I can confirm that there were in fact four leavings on May 3rd. John Pate, William Pate, Stuart Pate, Maggie Pate. They were headed for Ash City.

Maggie Pate has suffered severe trauma. Her report that the Village Council of New Manchester was involved in her family's expiration is unbalanced and without merit. The poor child is delusional. We are sorry to hear that John, William and Stuart were lost.

The important issue at hand, as you well know, is that the child witnessed a Transporter feeding. This compromises our relationship with the people and the survival of the few of our species that are involved in the Transportation Program. If the people found out the truth about what the Transporters are, we will be forever doomed.

Release the girl back into the wild, Heather. She must be left on the Outside. May God have mercy on our souls. It is for the good of humanity.

Regards,

Abraham Marker
Village Council
New Manchester, Georgia
"City of Refuge on the Plains"
(West of Terminal off of Old Route 20)



Bio: Jeremy Kelly has previous short fiction credits included in the Northern Haunts anthology from Shroud Publishing, as well as Pine Magazine.

SNAKE OIL

by Tonia Brown

MABEL RAISED THE LID ON THE STEWPOT and frowned at the contents. The meat was nearly white, and the vegetables were limp and soft. She tipped a few dashes of salt into the concoction and stirred it again. Better it be too salty than have Horace taste the difference, she thought. She poked her hand into her apron, drew out the small brown bottle and held it up to the cabin's weak light. It had cost her a month's worth of egg money, but she knew it would be worth it. That was, if it worked. It had to work.

"Doctor Betterbocker said it would work," she said, to herself, because Horace still wasn't home.

At first she doubted the Doctor. His presentation in front of Beulah's General Store was loud and trashy. The way he stomped up and down on his makeshift stage and shouted about his precious product bordered on disgraceful. Not to mention his dress was too showy, too flashy, and not very respectful at all. So many bright colors and fancy frills are fine for a lady, but on a man? No thank you. No self respecting farmer, cattle driver or rancher would be caught dead in such a get up. No sir. Mabel Whitaker would have never even thought twice about buying anything from a man like that.

"Mabel? Whatcha got there woman?" Horace suddenly asked.

His voice brought Mabel out of her revelry with a snap. She slipped the bottle back into her apron pocket and returned the lid to the stewpot. "Nothing. Did you brush down the mare before you put her up?"

Horace slammed the shack door behind him and tossed his dusty hat and dirty coat on the floor. "I'll take care of the nag in the morning."

You mean afternoon, she thought. Horace usually came home so late that he easily slept through most mornings. Mabel snorted and kept the thought to herself.

"Whatcha cooking? Smells funny," Horace said.

Mabel frantically searched for a lie. "Spices I picked up at Beulah's. Food cooked so long, waiting for you, I thought it might need something to pick up the flavor."

"Since when have you worried about flavor?" he snapped.

"Since when do you care what I worry?" she snapped

back. Mabel balled her fists and closed her eyes as she forced herself to calm down. She couldn't lose her temper, not tonight, not before he had eaten.

There was a time, many years ago, when he would come home before the sun set, sometimes almost happy to see her. But that time was long past; left behind in the east with their foreclosed farm and unpaid bills. The move out west was meant to rekindle their finances, yet all it rekindled was Horace's lust. And that was a flame Mabel thought she had snuffed out long ago.

"What's it anyways?" Horace asked.

"What's what?" she asked.

Horace rolled his eyes as he kicked his shoes across the room. They landed on the bed, like they always did, leaving plenty of grit for Mabel to sleep in yet again. Horace plopped himself into the seat at the head of the table and snatched up his fork and knife. "Dinner. What's for eats? You idjeet."

Mabel's nostrils flared as she bit her tongue nearly in two. Angry words leapt to her mind, but she pushed them away. Any other night she would have relished the chance to make a fool of him, but not tonight. She had to be nice. She had to suffer his shameful putdowns, at least until he had a belly full of stew. She patted her apron pocket to reassure herself.

"Beef stew," she finally answered as she carried the hot pot to his side. She bent over the table and ladled a spoonful into his bowl.

Horace looked at it warily, frowned, and then turned his round face slowly to her. He scratched his grizzled beard with stubby fingers and drew a sharp breath through his yellow teeth. "This is beef stew? Looks like puke. Probably tastes like it too."

She tried her best to ignore his rude remarks but knocking her cooking was too much. She wanted to explode at him, but instead she sucked her anger deep inside and gently spoke. "You know you're lucky to have anything to eat at all. Most respectable wives are in the bed by now, asleep at a respectable time for church in the morning." She turned back to the stove and added, under her breath, "But then again, most respectable wives have respectable husbands."

Horace snorted. He had heard her. "And most of these respectable husbands have respectable wives who perform their respectable wifely duties," he said as he thumbed towards the bed. He spat the word respectable, as though it were a curse word.

"There's nothing respectable about what you want to do there," she said calmly.

But Horace pressed her nerves harder. "Or better yet respectable wives that can bear their respectable husbands some youngins," he barked.

Mabel closed her eyes and balled her fists again. In thirty years of marriage Mabel never quickened, and Horace took every opportunity to point it out. "Well maybe a real man..." she started, but then let the thought go. He was out for a fight tonight, fishing for an excuse to run back to his whore's arms, but Mabel wouldn't give it to him. She wanted him to taste the elixir. She ran her hand into her apron and across the bottle. It made her feel better. It made her feel like everything would be all right. "Eat up," she said calmly.

Horace eyed her as she stood over the stove. "You aint eatin'?"

"I've all ready had mine," she lied. She had been too nervous to eat anything. She let out a deep sigh and returned to the table.

Horace lifted a spoonful of the stew to his nose and sniffed. This was Mabel's first hurdle; Horace was very particular about the smell of his food. He came home night after night drenched in sweat and spunk and a bodily stench rancid enough to wilt the apples on the trees, but wouldn't eat a meal that smelled bad to him. Mabel held her breath while Horace sniffed away. When he shrugged, she relaxed.

Horace poked the spoon between his lips and slurped. This was Mabel's second worry; Horace was very picky about the taste of his food. He would stick his poor excuse for manhood in any hole that would have him, and yet he wouldn't let just anything slide down his own gullet. When he swallowed, Mabel smiled.

He ate the whole bowl, asked for seconds, and then thirds.

Mabel was ecstatic.

Finally the stew pot was empty, the elixir eaten and the husband sated.

"Well Mabel, I must say that was really good," he said.

Mabel smiled and nodded silently.

"In fact, that might be the finest stew," Horace paused and let out a rough cough, "I have ever eaten."

She didn't know what to say. It had been so long since Horace had complimented her, she was genuinely speechless. A bead of sweat broke from Horace's brow and trailed through the grit and grime of his face. He coughed a few more times; rough and thick, like he had plowed all day and breathed in too much of the dusty earth. Except the only thing Horace plowed lately were the whores at that bordello.

But not anymore, she thought.

Mabel clasped her hands under the table and offered a silent prayer of thanks to Doctor Elijah Betterbocker's World Famous Stout and Hearty All Cure Elixir. She wasn't sure if the good Doctor was sent from the Almighty to help her or from the other place to punish Horace. All she knew was what the elixir was supposed to do. What she wanted it to do. What she needed it to do. She patted the little brown bottle in her pocket as the Doctor's voice echoed in the corners of her mind.

"Does someone very close to you have too much libido? Just one drop of my elixir will cool his hot blood! I personally guarantee it," the Doctor had said.

Just one drop.

Horace coughed again. He unbuttoned the neck of his shirt and rubbed a hand across his sweaty face. "Is it warm in here? You warm?" he asked in a weak voice.

"I'm just dandy. Not coming down with something are you dear?" Mabel asked. She stood and moved in to clean up the mess. When she reached for his bowl he shot a hand out and grabbed her. She looked up to Horace in shock. His face was a brilliant shade of crimson.

"M-m-may.... B-b-b-bell..." he stuttered.

"Horace, honey? Are you okay?" she asked. But she knew he wasn't okay. He was as bright as a beet for one thing. His neck was starting to swell for another.

"M-m-m-m..." he stammered. He held onto her tightly with one hand and clawed at his clothes with the other. His shirt buttons popped free, flew across the table, and landed with gunshot reports against the stove, pots and pans. "M-m-m-mabel!" He squeezed her arm tighter and tighter as the ricochet of his buttons filled the shack.

Mabel struggled to get away from him. "Horace, you're hurting me. Let go of me! Let go Horace!"

Horace pulled her close to him and then pushed her away. Then he pulled her close and pushed her away again. Over and over he reeled her in and cast her away

as his muscles twitched and convulsed. Finally he pushed hard enough to free her from his grip, and Mabel tumbled to the floor. She scrambled to the stove watched with revulsion as his body continued to dance and twist in the wooden chair. If anyone else had been watching, they might have thought he had a load of live ants in his long johns. But Mabel watched alone as billows of thick foam poured from Horace's lips and ran down his swollen neck.

She screamed.

Then just as sudden as it had begun, it was over. Horace dropped his head to the table with a loud thump, and Mabel knew he was dead. The elixir had killed him. She had killed him. Cool his hot blood, the doctor said. Cool his hot blood it did.

"Oh my," she whispered. "Oh me, oh my."

Mabel stood and wrung her hands in worry. She didn't mean to kill him; she just wanted her husband back. She just wanted her Horace to stay home with her, to need her, to love her like he used to. She didn't want him dead, only different. Mabel took the bottle from her apron and eyed it cautiously. She shook her head. Just one drop, the label read. Just one drop was all she needed. But she wasn't sure just one drop would work on a man like Horace. His sexual appetite was insatiable, she was sure one drop wouldn't be enough to stop it.

And so she had used the whole thing.

Mabel sat the empty bottle on the table and sighed. "What will I do with you now Horace? You're gonna be more trouble to me dead than alive."

As if he heard her, Horace suddenly sat up straight. She shouted in surprise. He pushed away from the table. His chair clattered to the floor behind him as he stood; ram rod straight, with his knees locked and his arms held tightly by his sides. Mabel laughed with relief. She hadn't killed him after all. But when he opened his eyes her laughter turned to a shriek of terror. Gone were the strong brown eyes that Mabel had fallen in love with thirty summers ago. Each eye was now a black and endless pit.

Mabel staggered away in horror.

Horace didn't follow. Instead he stood in place and swayed. Right to left, he swayed. Left to right, he swayed. As he undulated, he took on a rotten hue. Blacks and greens rippled in shattered patterns across his skin. Then Horace started to swell. Within moments his neck was as thick as his head, and both head and neck were quickly

catching up with his shoulders. His remaining clothes burst at the seams and fell from him in shreds. Horace's hair sloughed off his body in great clumps, from his head and chest and groin, until he was as all over smooth as a new born babe.

As for his troublesome member, the source of all of Mabel's worry, it shriveled and withered until his groin was as smooth as the rest of him. His legs pulled into one another and melded together to form a single long limb that coiled behind him. His arms twisted against his bare torso, and they too simply melted away. Horace then stretched and stretched, until his head touched the ceiling. He threw his head back and opened his mouth, as if to scream, but no sound came. His lips cracked and split into thin lines, and then they faded into the dark skin of his blank face. His nose softened and melted away, leaving two slender holes in its wake.

Mabel shook her head and stared in disbelief. She didn't understand what was happening. When a thin, forked tongue slipped from his cracked lips and teased the air, she suddenly knew. Her head pounded hard and fast as she struggled to breathe. Her arms went numb. Her eyes burned with frantic tears. She was dizzy and nauseas and suddenly very tired. Her legs finally gave way under her and she sat heavily on the kitchen floor. She raised her head and the room swam with double and triple images of her husband changing. Twisting. Writhing. Cool his hot blood, the doctor said. Cool his hot blood it did. Mabel laughed at the absurdity of it.

She was still laughing when her husband swallowed her whole.



Sisters Inside Out

by Carl R. Moore

WHEN JEN WAS SEVEN AND HER SISTER MARSHA was eight, they went in their mother's room and played a game called princess-wedding. It meant they tried on all her clothes like they were making a princess ready for a prince. Of course Marsha got to be the princess, and there was no taking turns because she said it wasn't that kind of game. Instead she put a silver belt around her head like it was a crown and wore a lacy top she called Mommy's jammies. She twirled and twirled in the strange clothes and said 'Look at me' while she watched herself in the mirror.

But Jen didn't care if her sister was being weird. It was worth it just to get to see her so grown up and pretty. And anyway that's not what made Jen mad. What made her mad was when they got caught and she threw off the clothes and said it was all Jen's idea and she was trying to make her stop. She got to do that and be the princess. That wasn't fair.

Another day Marsha had her friend Sally over and they were making up songs on her guitar. Jen wanted to play too, but Marsha said she didn't know how and to go away. Jen stormed off swearing she'd tell on her.

But when their mother came home tired and complaining about traffic, Marsha said she had a special surprise. She sang a song she made up called Sweet Little Sister to the tune of Hush Little Baby. Daddy came home in the middle of it and both her parents said how cute it was and said for Jen to go give her sister a big kiss.

It was hard not to, she looked so sweet with her black curls and her glassy smile. It was hard not to be confused, too, when her sister changed her mind and acted weird-nice.

* * *

When fall came and Jen was eight and Marsha was nine, Marsha got to keep a costume from a play she was in. It was a damsel suit with puffy pink sleeves and a sparkly cap Mom said was the color of champagne. Mom loved that Marsha was good at being in plays and let her wear the costume all around the house.

Jen didn't want to say anything about it, not really. But

Halloween was coming up and she didn't have a costume. Daddy said he'd take her to the mall to pick one out but Mom said no, it was too much money, she could make something simple. "But that's not fair. Look what Marsha has, it's not simple."

"Honey, Marsha got that because she was in the theater."

Jen hated the way Mom said theater. Like it was a rainbow or something that nobody could do anything about. "It's still not fair," said Jen. "She should at least take turns."

That night Mom and Daddy argued, even through half of Daddy's baseball game. But after they came to Jen's room with the damsel costume and said she could wear it trick-or-treating.

For a while Jen was scared, wondering what Marsha was doing, if they had to tear it away from her. But mostly she was just happy, and she fell asleep dreaming of how she would look. The next night Daddy had only taken her around one block when she tore her sleeve on a metal fence. She was already scared that Marsha was really mad at her because she had decided not to come, and when they got home her sister stopped playing guitar and glared up at her. "Give me back my costume," she said.

* * *

The next weekend was an Indian summer and Daddy took everyone on a hike. Mom didn't want to go in case it got cold again, but Daddy said it would be good for everyone to get out before they were cooped up all winter.

Marsha hadn't spoken to Jen all week and when they got out at the picnic area, she started going right up the side of the hill. Jen really wanted to just play down by the stream, but she followed after her sister anyway, with her mother muttering, "Be careful, Jenny."

Daddy was no help either because he was already getting out beer and sandwiches, and Jen could barely see her sister among all the slanted trees. As she ran to catch up, burdocks stuck to her dress and thorns tore at her sweater. I guess you're just trying to get back at me, she thought.

By the time she got to the top both of them were running. Marsha stopped herself at the edge of a deep crack in the hill that looked like it was sucking little branches and trees down inside it. It felt like it was sucking Jennifer too, because she was going so fast she couldn't stop herself from going over. Just in time she threw out her hand and caught a sticky little pine trunk.

When she looked up at her sister for help, Marsha's eyes looked stern and slit shaped. She started walking toward her, feet thumping on the packed grass. Jen told herself her sister didn't look like she was about to do the meanest thing ever. She told herself she was putting her hands out to help her back up.

But just as she reached her, Marsha's foot caught on a root. Her body folded and fell, one arm reaching back for a branch, just like Jen's had. Except instead she banged it against the rock ledge and cut open her wrist before plunging into the dark.

* * *

For months and months after that Mom was sad and worried and crying all the time. She even quit her part time job, to cope with loss, she said, and to keep an eye on her Jenny's health. Daddy's change was a little different. He stayed up late at night watching baseball games downstairs. Sometimes when she went down for a drink of water she saw the TV glowing blue on his face and beer bottles stacked on the coffee table like a brown city.

But Daddy was still always nice, and if he saw her, he said things like, 'Stick around, be my good luck charm,' and 'I can burp. Why can't he pitch?'

But Jen left Daddy be and went back up to her room where she liked it okay even though things were hard. In her room she got her homework done. When she got her homework done, her teachers said how good she was doing. She began to think she could handle second grade math and wondered about how Marsha used to have such a hard time with it.

All Marsha's toys were piled in the corner of her room. The doll house, the train track, the plastic fairies. The stuffed unicorn and champagne-colored damsel cap. All of it belonged to Jen now. And it was weird because she used to think their house was too plain, just like all the others in the development. The walls were all white, and her room was just a square with blue carpeting stretched from one end to the other, right into the closet.

But now with all of Marsha's stuff it seemed crowded.

The toys made shadows on the walls from her nightlight, and if she turned it off, they used the pale light from the neighbor's garage and looked even worse. Something about its glare reminded her of how the development wasn't near any regular roads. It just had trees on one side and the highway on the other. She didn't mind the deer that passed silently by, but the highway was always weird-noisy, just out of sight and hissing all the time.

Mom always said Jen had a hard time falling asleep because of the things she looked up in her medical dictionaries. Things like childhood depression and PTSD and other stuff. But to Jen it wasn't any of these things so much as the hissing highway and the big emptiness that felt heavy even though it was full of nothing.

* * *

One night she had a strange dream. She dreamt she was standing in her room and she could look back at her body lying on the bed. She walked across the carpet, in and out of the shadows of the toys. She was walking toward the closet door, and she had a funny feeling, a tickling in her sleep. The toys seemed to give off a soft rattle each time she stepped, and she noticed, lying off to her right among the shadows, was her sister's damsel costume from a few Halloweens back. It was all nice and neat, like somebody wanted it to be put on but didn't know it was ready.

* * *

The next morning she got up for school and almost forgot about the dream because of the yelling.

It was because instead of coffee with breakfast Daddy was having a beer. But the weird thing was Daddy didn't look soupy like he did during his games. He looked quiet and straight faced. Jen ate her cereal and when Mom was done yelling about the beer and looking up cirrhosis of the liver, Daddy took out a bill and started talking calmly about the credit card. He talked about Mommy's medical dictionary and the mortgage. He talked about the price of groceries and how he was going to have to work overtime instead of taking them up to Crawford Notch.

Jen went upstairs and still didn't think of her dream until she went in her room and saw the damsel costume lying out on the floor. That's when she got angry and shaky and slid down on her bottom beside her bed. She didn't want it to be this way, with her sister dead and her

parents yelling all the time. It was stupid.

Then she had a weird idea. She stood up and went to the window. She looked out at the wispy trees and deer shapes moving among them. She imagined carrying all of Marsha's things deep into the woods and walking until she reached the crack in the hill. There she would throw them one by one down into the dark...

"Jen, hurry up, you'll miss the bus!"

Her mother's yelling interrupted her daydream. She ran downstairs, grabbed her backpack and ran halfway to the bus stop when she noticed one of Marsha's toys caught in her straps. It was the stuffed unicorn with the rainbow colored horn.

When the late bus finally got her to school, she had missed homeroom and Mr. Windle even said he was going to take away her toy. That's when she said it was a present for Lana Haine.

Lana Haine looked up when she said this. She had short, dirty hair and people always said she never took a bath. An aspirin colored pimple stuck out on her face and people said it was because she was supposed to be not one but two more grades ahead. Jen walked right over to her in front of Mr. Windle and put the unicorn on her desk. Lana Haine didn't say anything when she did it, and neither did anyone else.

But later during recess she came up and said a stuttered thank you. "C-can I really keep it?" she asked. Jen nodded yes.

Mr. Windle watched her with a funny look on his face. He asked her after lunch if the toy was really hers and if it was really okay with her parents for her to give it away. She said it was, but Mr. Windle called her father to pick her up after school and asked again. Daddy lifted his Red Sox cap once and scratched his head. But when Jen said, "It's okay, it's just clutter," he shrugged and told Mr. Windle he was taking her home.

After that Jen began bringing in a toy every couple of days and giving it away. She stopped for a week sometimes, but always started again. She was amazed at how much stuff her sister had, but was determined to go through it all. The shadowy pile of it still bothered her at night, funnier shaped now that it was slowly disappearing. But knowing it would one day be gone kept her going.

Finally on her ninth birthday she was down to the last toy. It was the damsel costume with its pointy, champagne cap. Her mother came upstairs that night, her hair

even shorter and dyed darker than the last time she cut it. She said, "I hope you don't expect much for your birthday. Especially now that you gave away all your sister's things."

She closed Jen's bedroom door on her and went back downstairs. It was the only thing she ever said about giving away the toys, and also the first time Jen thought about how she was turning nine, the same age Marsha was when she died.

* * *

That night she had the dream again about getting up and looking back at her bed. Her body looked black and hunched under the blankets. Her hair looked damp with sweat and her face pale and frowning. She wanted to go back to herself, but her legs lurched and pulled her the other way. It was like some part of herself was angry at another as she went step, step, step, toward the closet door.

It looked so tall in front of her, glowing blankly by the neighbor's garage light, the shape like a diagram from the last page of her math book. "It looks hard," she said aloud, like she was talking to somebody.

That's when the door opened and her sister entered the room. She was much shorter than Jen now, mostly because her back was broken and twisted to one side. She still wore the clothes from the day she fell, her shirt ripped and all covered with dried blood and her wrist cut with a jagged purple scar. When Jen tried to turn away, Marsha grabbed her head and twisted it around to face a pair of bruised eyes that looked like they'd been punched.

"Don't you know why I'm here?" she asked.

Jen realized then she was crying in her sleep, her body shaking back on the bed.

But Marsha was in the way, and she couldn't go past.

"Don't you know?"

Jen shook her head. There was blood between Marsha's teeth and they looked small and dirty, full of soil.

"I'm here because you have to take turns. It isn't fair if you don't take turns."

"What do you mean," said Jen, "what's not fair?"

Her sister's bloody smile rose up out of her rags. "Being dead," she said.

Jen's body began shaking harder on the bed, heaving with its sobs. Marsha swayed to the sound, like she was

dancing to strange music, like she had the day she dressed up in her mother's mirror. "It was me who fell, but it should have been you," she sang. "It was me who had the talent and you who makes mom cry..."

"Wait," said Jen, "that's not fair!"

"What's fair," said Marsha, "is taking turns. Isn't it your turn to die? Come on, just for a while. You've lived all this time. And you'll live again. But me, what do I have?" Here her sister seemed to change, shudder in her ruined body, blood pulsing at her wrist and mouth like now that's how she cried. "Please, you have to take turns. You don't know what it's like... over there."

Marsha pointed to the closet.

Jen saw that it was dark there. The light should have spilled in a little, but she couldn't see the wall or the carpet. It was only dark.

"You want to take turns being dead?" Jen asked.

Marsha's teeth clicked as she nodded yes.

"But how does it work? When do we start?"

"We start tonight..." said Marsha.

That's when Jen saw her own body get up from the bed. It walked to the closet and stepped inside. She felt a sucking at the rest of her, at what had come out in her dream.

"Say yes! It's my turn! Say yes, say yes!" cried her sister.

Jen wanted to scream 'no' as she fell, but then thought of Mom and Dad, how they hadn't paid attention, thought of the mean look on her sister's face from the day when she fell. I've never been like them, she thought. I've always taken fair turns. So instead of no, her mouth opened and said yes, just to be fair, she said yes.

* * *

But if nightmares were children, death was their mother.

The place felt like it was full of nothing, but a heavy nothing, even worse than the empty feeling she had when she was alive. When she was alive. The thought sent a shiver through the stiff thing that was now her body.

She was walking through a narrow valley, very narrow with rock walls on either side. Here and there leafless trees grew along her path, their branches radiating shadows even though there wasn't any sun. A face appeared above her, in place of a low, full moon. It was a bird's face, an eagle sick and stupid. She wondered how it floated

there without any wings. She didn't want to look at it because its eyes wobbled in their sockets and when they got control fixed in weird directions like they wanted to get out but couldn't.

Its beak looked different, though. It looked hungry and ready. Its sharp shape hung open over the valley and one by one children were walking toward it. They were weeping and crying for their mothers. Some of them were with their mothers.

They were eaten just the same. They cried out in pain, wailed as their bones snapped into each other and rained down on the valley. Everywhere she looked was bursting with the downpour of bones. They hit her all over and she cried out, cried out to anyone to help, and it hurt and they were cold and splintered and she didn't want to be dead anymore...

* * *

She was still calling out "Marsha, Marsha!" when she awoke naked under her covers. Daddy sat at the foot of her bed and when her eyes opened, he handed her a glass of water.

"Nancy, she's awake," he yelled downstairs and Mom came running up.

Mom was wearing her black clothes, the slacks and lacy top she wore to Marsha's funeral. Her hair had a little plastic comb in it and wrinkles showed above her lip. "She is awake," she said, like it was a surprise she could be that way.

Mom sat down on her bed and gripped Jen's thigh with her hand. "Who are you?" she asked.

"What do you mean who am I?" Jen asked. "I'm Jen, Mommy. I'm Jennifer, what do you mean..."

"Shhhh!" Mom put her finger to her lips, then looked at Daddy. She let go of Jen's thigh and felt her forehead. "No fever," she said.

"Did she ever have a fucking fever?" he asked, swigging his beer.

"John, go downstairs," she said.

"I just think..."

"John, you're drunk. Go downstairs!"

Daddy got up, opened another beer from the six pack by his foot and adjusted his cap. He looked at her with a half-frown, but winked anyway, then left.

Mom leaned down over her then, so close Jen could see even more wrinkles in her blotchy, shopping mall tan.

"Honey," she said. "Do you remember anything about last night and this morning?"

Jen sat up a little in bed, wanted to get up and out and go after her father, but was caught by her mother's eyes. She remembered the dark pathway, yes, and the trees, and the eagle's head. "No, why, what should I remember?"

Mom stood up, put her hand on her forehead again. Her worried look changed to something else, the look she had when she was looking in her medical books. She picked up a thermometer off the nightstand and put it in its plastic sleeve. "I guess we don't need to take your temperature again. You seem fine, sweetie. You were sick today is all. Some twenty-four hour thing. You stayed home from school but you'll be better tomorrow."

Her mother picked up the rest of what was on the nightstand, went out her door and clicked it shut behind her.

That's when Jen noticed the smell. All around her even though her room was empty. Empty, even though there were stains on the floor. Everything was gone except her nightstand and the stains and the half-open closet door. And she knew the smell wasn't throw up or sick smells or anything from the bathroom. She knew the smell was something dead.

* * *

That night she heard a knock on the bedroom door. She almost screamed when it opened and footsteps sounded on her carpet. She pulled the blanket over her head but the thing pulling back was stronger.

When she opened her eyes, she saw Daddy looking back at her.

"I'm going to show you something," he said through his beer breath.

He held up his camera, the one that could shoot ten minute pieces of video. He brushed back her hair, took her hand and pressed play.

* * *

First it showed a door. She thought it was her closet door, but then she saw her father's hand reach out and knock on it. In response she heard sucking and grunting, like a pig except with a voice that said, 'Go away, you can't come... in... Go away!'

Daddy pushed the door open anyway and the cam-

era focused on a little girl in a damsel costume. She was walking in circles and wincing in pain because her back was twisted and broken.

"Daddy! I wasn't ready yet!" Her voice sounded crusty and her lips looked chalky and gray as her skin. Blood oozed from the scar on her wrist but it wasn't as much, wasn't as much as the rest of the...

Daddy was moving the camera around the carpet. One of the things was definitely a squirrel, another a cat. The big one was all taken apart with its fur lying beside it but she figured out from the narrow head that it had been a deer.

"I got you and Mommy all these presents for when you came home, I already told you I was putting on a show..."

That's when Daddy's hand shook a little on the camera. "Jenny, honey, they're dead, Jenny look at them..."

Her sister's face twisted up, stretched its smile into its bruises and sneezed a clot of blood. "I am not Jenny. I am not Jennifer. I am Marsha. Marsha, Marsha, Marsha. You have forgotten me you fuckin' drunk but Mommy did not that crazy bitch, she did not forget, I am Marsha..."

* * *

The video shut off and Daddy dropped the camera on the carpet. He was a little hiccupy and Jen said she'd get him a beer and he said no, just tell me who you are.

"I'm Jennifer, Daddy," she said, and he hugged her. They rocked on her bed for a while, rocked until the sun set over the development and the neighbor's garage light seeped through the window and filled the room with its low white glow.

* * *

The next day she saw a square red, white and blue sign on the lawn that said GERMACK REALTY. She asked Mom what it meant and she said it meant that you can't save the house by poaching deer and putting them in the freezer.

Mom started dropping her off at school every morning and going on to her new job at a tanning salon at the mall. She seemed happy and like she had something important to do even though she wore the black slacks and lacy top a couple of times a week and on the other days just black.

Sometimes she sang the words ‘With or without you...’ and humdie-hummed the rest while she drove.

* * *

For weeks Jen was tired all the time at school but she did her work because she wanted to learn it really well. Her teacher said she was remarkable and brought her a fifth grade math book with long division and she did it all right.

“But we’re concerned there’s something wrong,” Mrs. Laring, the guidance counselor, told Mom. “Is everything okay at home? We know her father used to pick her up...”

“John’s not driving these days,” Mom said. “We’re under some financial pressure. But there’s no law against that, right?”

* * *

Daddy had been calling in sick a lot and hanging around the house in his underwear watching TV. He still put his cap on sometimes, but baseball season was over. He mostly watched The History Channel now. Sometimes he asked her to come read a book on his lap. He smelled like unwashed hair and beer and he picked books that were too young for her like Barnyard Animals. She let him do it because she had to admit she liked to be held, and Mom wouldn’t do it because she was like a prickly-bush even if you sat a foot away from her in the car.

* * *

One winter night the closet door opened and her sister’s body stumbled out naked. Her gray chest heaved like her dead lungs could catch their breath and her pressed-down cheeks spread in a jellyish smile. “My turn. My turn again.”

Jen nodded and got up out of her body. She didn’t bother looking back at it. She hated that it was her turn again but marched across the room because she had to, when you were sisters you had to take turns, even when you got dead.

* * *

The closet had doorways this time. The first a paint-

peeled paneled thing, like they had in old houses closer to downtown. It smelled wet, like rotted wood. When she opened it she fell through splinters and damp soil.

She landed on an iced-over lake with mountains all around it. Her legs crunched and shot with pain then stood her up and made her walk anyway. In the distance, somewhere between all the high, shadowy rocks, she knew the valley was there. She shivered when she thought of the eagle’s head and managed to steer toward the middle of the lake.

All around her vapors rose from the ice up into a sky filled with northern lights. Only these weren’t like the bluey-maroon northern lights Daddy had showed her once. They were pale and sagging, like ragged curtains and the stars flickered like dying moths. She felt her feet staggering up a silver ladder. The metal hurt her hands and the curtains began to open.

The ladder fell away and she was sitting in a theater. The audience was full of folding chairs, all empty except a few, and these were full of dressed skeletons that didn’t move.

But the people on the stage did move. An organist with a shrunken skull of a face danced his fingers across his keys. An old man in a soot-covered smock knelt behind him, stoking a pile of orange coals with hands that looked blistered and cooked. And in the center of the stage a black haired girl who looked a little like her sister but was way taller stood next to a table holding a cleaver. She was smiling the way salesgirls did at the mall. A line of parents and children trailed off to the right.

“Next customer,” the girl said while the organ warbled its aimless circusy music.

The mother and the boy in front began to fight. “You go... No, you go...” they cried. She heard words like ‘worthless’ and ‘hate you’ and the mother put her hands on the boy and he squirmed like a fish and tried to run off the stage until the girl with the cleaver said, “Okay, you first.”

She put him on the table and began chopping. Jen was thankful she could close her eyes, that in death they still let her close her eyes. But when the chopping stopped she had to open them.

“It’s just a doll, silly,” said the girl.

She stepped to the front of the stage and held out a naked, stuffed doll that was the boy, with red yarn where the blood should be.

The whole line breathed a sigh of relief and talked and

giggled a little.

Jen breathed out and wiped the tears from her face. She thought her turn must be almost over. She looked up at the stage again to see if it was true.

But the girl was shaking the body in her hands. She was giving her salesclerk smile through the blood, saying, "A dolly? A silly? No it's not, no it's not, no it's not."

* * *

Jen woke up downstairs on the living room sofa. Someone had wrapped her in blankets and left a tilted medicine bottle beside her with blue pills spilling out. She could tell by the sun it was afternoon, but not too late because the school bus wasn't back and the whole development was quiet except for the hissing of the highway.

When she sat up she noticed there was a folded piece of paper on the coffee table. She picked it up and read the note:

* * *

I left the deer in your bedroom.

* * *

Jen had to cover her mouth then because she thought she was going to get sick. She couldn't handle seeing another dead animal in her bedroom, its body full of bent bones and the diseases Mom looked up in her dictionary.

But when she got upstairs to her room, when she held her breath against the smell and opened the door, she saw that Marsha hadn't left her a deer at all. She had left her Daddy.

He was lying on his back, tucked into her bed with his eyes wide open and a bead of blood in his nose. His t-shirt was on backwards and mashed with throw-up. The beer bottles lay scattered on the carpet, their brown city demolished, and someone had folded his hands over the camera on his chest.

* * *

She heard Mom moving around downstairs while she picked it up and replayed the video. It was like she was waiting for Jen to get the message, get some kind of hint

before she came upstairs for her.

But Jen didn't want any kind of hint. She just wanted to see her father's face, confused and sad as it sucked in beer after beer handed to him by the little hands that were also holding the camera. "But don't you miss me? Don't you miss me, too?" Marsha was saying.

"I love you both," he said. "I love you both the same no matter who you are."

She giggled. "You love this," she said, handing him another beer.

"Not that much," he said. "Not really, honey. I think I'm done. I'm just looking after you until your mother comes back. We're selling the house and then we're starting over. Just the three of us're gonna go out and start all over..."

"Four of us, Daddy. Jenny and me."

"Whatever you say, honey. Honey, did you cut your wrist? Your hip looks funny..."

* * *

Mom didn't come in that night. Jen heard her around the door with the drill doing something, but she didn't come in and Jen didn't get up and go to her. She was too busy looking from her bed to the camera to the closet. Looking after Daddy for one more night because he didn't scare her, it was okay he was there. And Marsha didn't come for her either. The night passed with the carpet and the bottles and the body. She even thought of doing some math. Mr. Bartek had taught her what a variable was, how a variable could be anywhere in an equation...

* * *

When Mom finally came for her, she was wearing the black funeral top. She gave her a starchy hug that scratched her skin and called her 'you poor child.' She cried a lot and kept away from the EMT people and police people and brought her into her bedroom when she said she'd be staying a while. Mom's bedroom was a lot bigger but not much different from hers since the toys were gone. It was all white walls with the same blue carpet as the rest of the house. And its closet had a sliding door.

When it was open Jen noticed the damsel costume hanging on the rack. Beside it hung other costumes and dresses. Lots of white ones and below them shoes and a guitar. On the far side of the room stood a little wooden

riser that was kind of like a stage.

But when Marsha came out it was still from Jen's closet. Mom would leave the door open at night and Jen would hear her uneven footsteps thudding up the hall. Her sister would round the corner then and smile, throw out her stiff arms and rip Jen out of Mom's bed by her neck. She would say, "Your turn!" not like she was making a deal anymore. She would say it bossy and rough and Mom would keep her eyes closed, her wrinkly mouth kind of smiling in her sleep.

* * *

Jen usually had bruises in the morning because the bones rained hard in the valley. Her ears echoed with the moaning of the dead and her eyes were wide and blood-shot all day long because if she even blinked the eagle's face was there...

She still liked solving equations at school but everything else she could barely do. The teachers never bothered her about it because of what happened with her father. They shook their heads because he drank himself to death in his daughter's own bed. She once overheard Mom and the guidance counselor talking about it again saying at least the insurance covered the house, at least she had that stability during her difficult time.

* * *

But when Mom wasn't there, Mrs. Laring still stared at her a lot. There was no way she could hide the bruises from her turns being dead. The nightmares were getting worse because after the insurance people stopped coming around, Mom moved her back in her room. Whenever she was in, Mom shut and locked the door after her, and when Jen asked why, she just ignored her. If she yelled or tried to fight her, Mom's eyes narrowed into her tan and her lips got tight. "I could have them put you away, little missy," Mom said. "I could have them put you somewhere way worse than a bedroom with a lock on the door."

Mom started making her watch shows about insane asylums before bed. Sometimes they were movies, sometimes they were like the news, like stories about real places. They were always bad and showed people getting shocked. She said as long as Jen went to school and came home she wouldn't have to go there.

She even brought Jen math books for her afternoon lock-ups. She always made sure she used the bathroom

first and said not to make any noise because she was going for her nap. Mom always did this after work now, like she didn't want to sleep at night.

And sometimes, if Mom left her alone with the TV while she was in the shower or out a few minutes in the yard, Jen would sneak upstairs and look in her bedroom. She'd peek her head in and see the little stage, where sometimes the guitar was left out, sometimes the costumes were lying around on the floor.

* * *

Once Mrs. Laring pulled her out of class at school. She told Jen she wanted to talk to her on her own. She had candy and snacks in her office that day, and a man in a suit with a cell phone on his hip. He had short, buzz-cut hair like a baseball player, like Daddy used to have. He looked strong and confident, like he thought he could do things to help people. Mrs. Laring said his name was Ray and he did a job like hers and just wanted to talk.

They offered her the snacks and asked how she was doing. They asked about her father and her mother and eventually they asked about the bruises.

"They happen at night," she said.

"What do you mean at night? How do they happen at night?" asked Mrs. Laring.

"They're from the bones. Or sometimes the girl on the stage."

Mrs. Laring and Ray looked at each other. Ray pulled his chair a little closer to hers. "Jennifer," he said, "do you ever feel confused? I mean... does Jennifer ever feel confused if she's Jennifer... maybe doesn't want to be Jennifer?"

Jen looked at him. "I'm Jennifer," she said. "Are you a guidance counselor or a policeman?"

Ray frowned, took a deep breath. "I work for The Department of Human Services," he said. "I want to help you if I can. Jennifer, I know sometimes it's hard to tell the truth. I know sometimes the truth hurts so badly it's like we want to be somebody else."

"I don't want to be anybody else," she said. "I know you think I'm crazy, but I'm not crazy at all. I'm Jen and I have problems but it's not what you think."

"Then tell us. If you tell us the truth, we can help. If you tell us the truth, we won't think you're crazy at all."

"Okay," said Jen. "I take turns being dead with my sister. Her body comes out of the closet at night. She puts on her damsel costume and sings songs for my mother

while I go to where it's dark and rains bones and the eagle eats the kids and their parents."

* * *

Ray and Mrs. Laring gave Jen a ride home that night but they were stupid and called ahead and Mom was waiting with her attorney. Jen sat on the steps while they argued and they called the regular police. All the houses turned red and blue with their lights while Mom sobbed like she was on stage and said, "This child has been through enough!"

* * *

That night she took away Jen's math books and locked her door. "I hope she makes you stay dead a whole week!" she shouted.

But on that Mom didn't understand. She could control the outside but not the inside. She couldn't make Marsha come out, no matter how bad she wanted her to sing, because if it wasn't her turn, it wasn't her turn.

The weeks began to pass without any sign of her sister, and Mom was getting madder and madder that she wasn't coming out. She made Jen stay home from school the whole time and only once in a while let her downstairs where she saw a lot of the blue pills around, sometimes on the table, sometimes by the bathroom sink.

After a while she gave Jen her math books back not because she wanted to, but because she hoped they would make Marsha come out.

"She comes when she comes," Jen said. "Sometimes a lot, sometimes a little. The first time, it took her a whole year. But I know she'll come again. Nobody wants to be there."

Mom looked a little frightened when Jen said that, and even spent a day wrapped in a towel, holding onto her lawyer's business card. But the next day she was back to her slacks and black lace, back to her long lock-ups and hardly any food.

Then on a day so gray she wasn't sure if it was morning or afternoon, Jen took out a piece of math paper. She wrote, "I am 9 years old" on it. It was funny, she thought. She wrote another sentence, "I am locked in my room." It made her giggle, because it was a sentence but you could also look at it like an equation, like you could see all the letters as variables. But what would solve this

equation? Jen had always been fair, even though Marsha hadn't. She had always taken turns with her, even when it meant going someplace bad, she had done it...

Mom brought her a little rice that night and found her on the floor in front of a pile of paper scratched with diagrams and numbers, pictures and plans. "How dare you," she said as she slammed and locked the door. "Don't you know you are mine? You think it's better out there? You think you're getting some ideas? You're a freak and you don't know how to handle yourself. You have no idea what it's like trying to survive out there, and neither did your father!" She was hammering her fist on the door as she said this, as if she couldn't just unlock it and open it. But it was part of her message that there was no way out, no way for Jen to make it without her.

That night Marsha came lurching out of the closet. She looked sunken and skeletal, her eyes bruised deeper into their sockets. It took everything Jen had to throw out her arm and stop her sister in her tracks.

"Wait," she said. "I have to tell you something."

Marsha turned around. Jen saw surprise in her face even though her cheek muscles were stretched and flabby, even though her pupils were shattered like smashed pill bugs. "You have something to tell me?"

"I have an offer for you. You think you have it figured out like you always did, like when you used to boss me around, but you don't. I know what you always wanted. You wanted to get out. You milked mom, but really she bothered you as much as I did. Because you already knew what you wanted to be. You were nine years old and you already wanted to get way away from us."

Marsha's crooked corpse swayed and looked at the floor. "I was a little bit special," she said. "I had some talent."

"But you also had a temper. You screwed up with how mean you were. And you screwed up trying to kill me and died."

This time Marsha's bug eyes went blacker and she glared like the day Jen tore her dress. She threw her hands around Jen's throat and started to squeeze.

"Go... ahead... kill me. Kill me and you can't take turns... get it? You can't take turns without me."

The corpse stopped and stood twitching and confused.

"So then listen to me. Do me a favor tonight. Help me tonight and I will stay alive. I will get you out of here and you won't have to do your little freak-show for Mom. I

will get you out, sister. It's what you've always wanted, and it's only fair."

* * *

When Jen put on the damsel costume it was for the first time since that Halloween when Daddy took her trick-or-treating. It was kind of snug, but fit better when she cocked her hip like her back was broken. She stopped a moment and let Marsha be her mirror, standing in exactly the same way. The corpse even rubbed her gray, soil-stained skin against hers and made her dirty with her stench.

"Stand here," she said, putting Jen in front of the door, "and I will call to her."

And in her sing-song, rot-throated voice she called for Mom, and when the lock began to turn, she went back into the closet.

* * *

Mom had the stage set up with track lights and music playing. The light was white like the walls, so different from the stage that was in the closet. Soon she would know how different, thought Jen, as she picked up her sister's guitar.

"Are we going to begin with some singing?" her mother asked. She'd blow-dried her hair and put on a white blouse like Jen hadn't seen her wear in months. She had clear lipstick on and smelled showered, with lavender lotion rubbed into her tan.

The guitar cracked when it hit her head. When the neck broke, the strings went all awry. Jen beat her and beat her with it because she wasn't sure she could fight Mom if she was able to stand back up. The world whirled with frets and broken necks. The high strings whined and the low strings groaned and she thought of Daddy and Marsha and how now Jen was the only one left in this world. "But I'm not done with you yet," she said aloud.

* * *

The facility was made out of bricks. Ivy climbed the walls and the grounds had an iron sculpture she liked to look at in the afternoon. She still had woods outside her window, but here there were woods on all sides. And there were no highways anywhere, not even the sounds of cars. Once in a while a deer poked its nose out of the

trees. That was nice. She liked to look at the living deer.

Her room had a narrow, doorless closet that Marsha had to use. She came loping out at night as she did before, hair stringy and stiff, skin red with shattered veins, eyes a horrible soup of black. The other patients screamed and caterwauled when she walked the hallways at night. The security guards restrained her and the doctors gave her shots.

But they could not stop her, or her meanness. She had become very mean now that she knew that she was screwed.

Because now that Jen was older, she saw her life clearly. She solved her equations and saw that what she had done had been completely fair. The first half of her life Marsha had been the boss. She had lied to her and kept her inside her spell, and Jen had been too sheepish to know how to get out.

But now she went anywhere she wanted through her mathematics, explored through her studies, and it was Marsha whose outside wasn't LA or TV, but the asylum's hallways and other patients. And she had better not complain, because if Jen wanted, she could pick up her razor and send her sister back inside the closet for good.

As for Mom, she already was inside for good, and Jen got to see her whenever it was her turn. She led her along the line, weeping her way up to the girl on the stage, shivering her way up to the eagle's mouth. Each time the ending was the same, no matter how badly Mom begged. Jen only caressed her arms and kissed her mother's head. "Because of what you did to me and Daddy. Because of what you did to all of us," she said.

"But it wasn't just me," Mom growled. "It was Marsha, it was Marsha, too."

"And believe me, she's gotten hers," said Jen. "Only I am free. They feed me well and I enjoy my math. And sometimes I am visited by the deer."

Mom scowled at her then and Jen just pushed her forward in line as the bones rained down around them. Someday she too, would have to walk into the eagle's mouth. But not yet. Because Jen had many years ahead of her. Years of crisp autumns and differential equations. Years of hot tea, deer and swaying trees. And during all of them, she only had to be dead half the time. But her Mom and her sister, they were trapped in their errors for good.



Bio: Carl R. Moore is a horror/dark fantasy/sci-fi writer living in upstate New York. Previous publications include "Empire of One" (Danger City, 2005), "Attack of the Deer" (Danger City II, 2006), "State Labs" (Thuglit, Oct. 2007). He also has a horror manuscript WAKE THE WICKED being represented by agent Bob Fleck of Professional Media Services.

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FEATURED ARTIST

Matt Truiano

<http://www.matttruiano.com>

Matt Truiano received a fine arts degree from the School of Visual Arts. He works as a tattoo artist in Valley Cottage, NY. His paintings have been shown in galleries inside and out of New York City including HPGRP Gallery In Lower Manhattan.

Matt states that: "Older paintings had a surreal look that was not heading in any particular direction, now I'm trying to focus on horror/zombie/monster look. This started with a painting I did as a goof in my sketch book of Hanna Montana as a zombie. It was an instant hit and I got a lot of positive feedback from it. Probably the most out of all my paintings. So I started painting friends and celebrities portraits using the same method of some sort of zombie/bloody format. It works well and is a blast to do. Im always looking at other artists work that I admire trying to figure out how to make my work better."









MEAN SPIRITED

by Joshua Scribner

“PLEASE, JUST LET IT GO,” Yancy said to the cops who couldn’t hear him. One of them was standing on the roof of the cruiser with a pair of binoculars. He had heard about this. It was “Click it or Ticket” month nationwide, and this was how they cracked down.

He watched as the cop kind of hesitated, like he had just saw something strange or felt something in his body he had never felt before.

“That’s it. Pretend you don’t see me. Go on to the next person.”

Yancy moved past him, down the mountain road, around a corner. He blew out a sigh of relief, but he didn’t thank them; he never thanked them; they didn’t like to be thanked.

He had felt something strange this morning while meditating, not something completely foreign, just out of place. He had felt it on several occasions when he had needed certain tasks performed, but this was the first time he had felt it out of the blue.

He looked off at the trees and watched many birds look back at him as he moved down the road. This was nice. His life was nice.

He heard a loud chirp, but it wasn’t from a bird. He turned around in his seat and saw the cruiser behind him, its lights flashing.

“Just turn back. Forget you saw me. Stop someone else.”

The cruiser slowed, but its lights still flashed. For several seconds, it was losing ground on him. It looked as if it would stop, but then it suddenly sped up and made the chirping sound again.

“Pull over!” came from the bullhorn.

Yancy wondered what his car would do. No blinker came on, but it decelerated and moved to the side of the road.

The cruiser followed. There were two cops inside. After about a minute, the same one who had been on the roof got out. He walked slowly to the side of Yancy’s car. He stood behind the front door, but Yancy could see him in the side mirror. He was kind of slumped over, as if in a little pain. It took a good thirty seconds for Yancy’s window to come down.

“Sir,” the cop said in a labored and pained voice. “Do you know why I stopped you?”

Yancy laughed, but it wasn’t all him; it was mostly not him.

“I’m not totally sure. I would have thought you would have let me pass.”

“Sir, you’re not wearing a seatbelt.”

Again, Yancy laughed, and it was so loud and so joyful that he was sure anyone else would have been hulled from the car right now and tested for alcohol.

“I would never where a seatbelt, because it would offend them.”

“Sir?”

“When you saw me from the top of your car and noted that there was no strap over my body you had to have also noticed that my hands were not on the wheel.”

Looking in the mirror, Yancy could see the blood had drained from the cop’s face.

“I have so many spirits with me that there are only a few things I do for myself, and since I don’t like to drive down this mountain, it’s always taken care of.”

“Sir?”

The cop was practically gasping for breath. Yancy looked in the rearview-mirror.

“Looks like your partner is slumped over the wheel. He might need medical attention.”

The cop responded to this but only with a loud exhale.

“Listen. I know you felt something foreboding when you saw me coming. I kind of sent that at you. But something else, something wicked and playful, toyed with your mind. That’s my fault because I haven’t had any business for her lately and she’s grown bored. Still, I think if you go ahead and walk back to your car and forget you ever saw me, you’ll be fine.”

Yancy watched the cop hesitate for a few seconds. Then he saw him reach for his gun. Yancy was not afraid, at least not for himself.

He laughed joyfully as the cop brought his hand from the gun to his chest and then fell to the ground. Losing him in the mirror, he leaned out the window and watched as the cop kind of flopped around on the ground. He

then looked to the road, where cars passed buy, their passengers either oblivious or afraid to act.

His car soon got back on the road. Yancy didn't like what had happened to the two cops. But he didn't question the spirit; he never questioned her.



Worthy

by Keaton Foster

Shaken world, torn apart,

Dysfunctional kid.
Painful life from the very start,

Born of sin, regretful in nature.
Raised by wolves, handed over to pain.

Molested and raped,
Each and every day, no matter the case.

Hollow heart remains,
Weighted down by all that you let happen.

Failure to protect me,
Forgotten mother, stranger called father,

Who are you and why?
Why did you create me,

Only to offer me up in such ways.
Was I not special, was I not worthy.

Of your love.

BIO: For Keaton Foster writing is not only a hobby or something he does in hopes of fame or fortune. Writing is and will always be a way of life, something he must do. He lives to create writings that go beyond conventionality, far beyond the normal whatever that is. Piercing deep into the heart of what it means to be alive, to be human. "We owe it to ourselves to question all that climbs to the sky and falls at our feet" (Keaton Foster, 2008). Enjoy your trip through the world that will be painted, the questions that will be raised, and the emotions that will be conveyed within my words. Visit Keaton Foster's Websites: <http://www.beyondthedarknesscreativewritings.net> and <http://keatonfoster.Writing.Com>

Untitled

by Chad Alsop

Slow
Quiet
Every thought screams through the air
Empty foot step in the snow
Flowers
Devoured by the over bearable gloom
Leaving memories hanging
Like dead trees
Naked
Exposed
For what they really are
The sight of your breath
Lingering a little bit longer
The starless nights
The Harvest moon
Frozen
In the sky, take a breath
Let the cold
Enter your soft pink lungs
Feel the pain left over
From sunny summer days
Inspiring
So empty
So cold
So still
There's monsters on the streets
Wearing their mask's
Long past hallows eve
And wait
Until they see me.

IN THE DUMPSTER KING'S ZIP CODE

by Catherine J Gardner

THE DUMPSTER KING'S HOME WAS a foul-smelling alleyway named The Woods. A place where he felt his hobo soul belonged. Perched on his pal Freckles' shoulders, he applied a fresh dab of green paint to faded trees. The mural was his attempt at recreating the magical woods of the past – woods long paved over and built upon.

From above them, the shrill wail of a banshee cried out. It unsteadied his hand. With the familiar scrape of a window opening, the pair dived for cover. They mistimed their escape and a bowl of hot water showered over them. It splattered against the wall. Green paint ran down the mural. The Dumpster King and Freckles sat in the snow, looked up at the apartment window, and then down at their drenched skin. Freckles shivered. They were officially one hundred and three percent hatchet swinging, axe wielding mad. The window closed, and the banshee disappeared inside.

The three angry sisters had moved into the apartment block a fortnight earlier. Slamming van doors and sniping at each other from the start, an alternative way to begin 1984. They kept the Dumpster King awake at night. They were the reason his big bruiser of a buddy, Freckles, had hefted his cardboard boxes up town. He was going to have to do something about them.

Freckles slammed his fist into the snow. If they had been up hill, or if the alley had slanted to any degree, then it would have caused an avalanche.

When you have decided you are going to do something about someone then it is best to do it without delaying, while your temper is white hot.

Freckles pulled the Dumpster King up. Water dripped from them and melted the snow. Thudding through the white thickness, the Dumpster King reached into his home and pulled out a discarded can of out-of-date peas. The three angry sisters also used his home as a dumpster for their trash. Rather than the typical stone thrown up at a window to gain attention, he hurled the can at and through. Glass shattered and imploded inward.

Red hair and a blanched face looked out through the gaping hole.

"Hey missus," the Dumpster King called up. "This

your diamond ring?"

"Did you break my window?" she spat.

"Well, um, yeah, but is this yours? I mean it fell with the water; least I think it did. Do you have a diamond ring?"

"Of course," she replied looking at fingers weighted down with cheap costume jewellery. The Dumpster King imagined her hands lying severed in the snow. Too quickly, she added. "Yes, it's mine and I will have it back. Wait there."

The Dumpster King and Freckles were not going anywhere. Oh, well maybe just back to the dumpster to find something to smash in her not so-delicate brains. Freckles mimicked a lethal punch and the Dumpster King patted his friend on the elbow.

The redhead stomped through the snow barefoot, and seemed not to notice that her toes were turning blue. She held out her hand, and her fingers curled back and forth in a gimme-gimme gesture. The Dumpster King looked down at his empty hands and then up at Freckles. Freckles looked down at the woman and then, SPLAT... A jar of pickles exploded over her forehead and imbedded in her scalp. Blood ran down her cheek as a jagged shard poked out of her left eyeball. A pickle wobbled, skewered on the edge of the glass. The right eye blinked. With a kick to the back of her knees from Freckles, the woman fell down to the snow. The arm that reached out to save her contorted and snapped beneath her weight. Bone poked through skin. As the first drop of blood hit the surface and began to crystallize outwards, the glass shot through the eyeball to her brain. Her right eye popped out of its socket.

"Did you hear it squelch?" The Dumpster King asked Freckles, who nodded in reply. "Sounded like biting into a cherry tomato."

The Dumpster King and Freckles would probably never eat a cherry tomato or a hobo's balls or anything that popped in the mouth ever again.

Freckles pulled the dead girl towards the mural and placed her against a painted tree. She flopped forward. Freckles smiled. The Dumpster King didn't; he knew it wasn't over.

Blue eyes haloed by orange skin and a short crop of white hair poked out of the broken window. "Did you just break my window?"

"No," the Dumpster King lied. "Some redhead just fell through it. If your name's Cynthia, she's asking for you."

"Why that bi..." She smiled. "I'll be right down."

Cynthia was the brunette and the blonde hated, hated, despised her in a hatchet way. After all, Cynthia had taken shears to her head as she slept, shorn off all her hair and nipped her ear ever so intentionally. Meaning pressed down hard on the shears, pulled and cut through the lobe taking a slice of her cheek with it. It's amazing what you hear when lying in a dumpster with only cardboard for a blanket.

The blonde did not come barefoot. Black boots stomped across the snow and took no heed of the smeared blood. Seeing the mess of her sister, she stopped and placed an unfortunate hand to her mouth. Unfortunate because as the discarded homemade tinsel (wire with bits of foil taped to it) looped over her head, and Freckles pulled back, instead of strangling, he severed her hand. It fell to the snow with a clean cut. The marrow looked good enough to chew on. The Dumpster King's first thought was 'it's packed in ice', as if he meant to call 911 and have it re-attached.

Of course, he did not intend to do that. The moral of this could be – careful what you throw in the dumpster outside your home as it may come back to bite you or worse.

This was mid-worse. As the blonde fell forward, her bloody stump smearing the already crimson snow, Freckles moved in. Severing the hand proved useful for it left the second angry sister with only one hand to tug at the wire with. It bit at her fingers and sliced off her fingertips. With no fight left, her fingers dropped to the snow, quite literally in the case of the little finger for it bounced towards the dumpster where a passing cat mistook it for dinner. The tinsel tore through her throat and severed her windpipe. The blonde croaked for a second, let out a terrible death wheeze, and then, quite literally croaked it.

Now it would be too much to hope that the third angriest sister would just pop her head out of the window and come on down. That was never going to happen. However, the Dumpster King knew something very important about the third sister. After the scalding water poured down from the window, like slops in the Middle Ages, she was never far behind. This sister was a creature

of routine and always appeared carrying a bag of potato peelings, vegetable cuttings and mashed up unwanted food – of which there was a lot, because the third sister was anorexic. This also meant that the bag often contained just-spewed vomit.

Swinging the plastic bag back and forth, its rotting contents visible, the third sister entered The Woods unaware two wolves waited. She took no note of the Dumpster King or Freckles or even her mutilated sisters. They were on the periphery, mere specks that needed washing from her eyeballs. If he had any bleach to hand, the Dumpster King would oblige.

Sometimes luck is with the just. The luck went like this: Bag splits open, contents include a banana skin. Blue stilettos slip on the skin and the brunette swan dives into the lap of the redhead.

Freckles moved quicker than his six foot seven frame should be able to. His bear paw of a hand slammed the head of the brunette into the redhead and cracked her skull. This one down and dazed, but not out. A thump from Freckles fist and the noses of both sisters splintered. Bone poked through meat. Thump, thump, THUMP.

With a final splintering of bone, the brunette fell back, the fire in her eyes extinguished. Nothing but specks to the glaze now as blood pooled and veins burst.

The Dumpster King at last had a part. He turned the brunette over and cut through her jumper with the jagged edge of the smashed pickle jar. Skin exposed, he cut through the pale surface and created a bloody pocket of flesh. He grinned, Freckle grinned, and between them, they hauled the brunette onto the redhead's knee and placed the redhead's hand inside the pocket of flesh. The broken jaw of the brunette flopped down creating the perfect ventriloquist's dummy. Her throat looked raw, as if she had been screaming.

Standing back to admire their work, the Dumpster King realised victory was bittersweet. He would have to leave The Woods and perhaps move uptown where the alleys where all back this and back that. The stench secured behind electronic gates. He looked at his dumpster, he looked at the three mutilated corpses, he looked up...

"Always wondered what the view would be like from up there," the Dumpster King said and held up the arm of the blonde. "Do you want leg, breast or rump for supper?"

* * *

A checked tablecloth covered the scratched kitchen table. The Dumpster King and Freckles sat opposite each other. Freckles stabbed a fork into the table as they waited for the oven timer to click down to the ping. They seemed to have been waiting a long time and were close to starving.

Now, it may have come to a point where Freckles needed to eat the Dumpster King and vice versa, only it turned out there was a fourth angry sister. This sister was not just angry. She was knife wielding, rabid-werewolf bashing crazy and she hated her sisters even more than the Dumpster King did.

The fourth sister had connected an explosive device to the oven timer. Freckles rapped his knuckles on the table as the time clicked into the final minute and Dumpster half-turned when... PING!

The Dumpster King and Freckles were back in The Woods, well part of them anyway. Dumpster's left hand and exploded lungs sizzled on the snow, while Freckles freckle's and empty eye sockets looked down at his skinned skeleton.

Bio: Over sixty of Catherine J Gardner's stories have been published, and she has work forthcoming in the Northern Haunts, Malpractice, Wolf-Songs and Bloody October anthologies.



GALL

by Carlos Hernandez

LIKE MOST DECENT JOVIANS, I wouldn't mind shooting me a Chinaman every now and then. Only reason a Chinaman comes to Jupiter is to cause trouble. Don't get me wrong now, I love all kinds of Chinamen: French Chinamen, Kenyan Chinamen, Syrian Chinamen — hell, even regular old Chinamen Chinamen. Just so long as they stay on Earth and keep buying my wares. Far as I can tell, only thing that happens when a Chinaman leaves China — sorry, I mean Earth: but since China's the only superpower left, it's all Chinese to me. Anyway, like I was saying, only thing that happens when a Chinaman comes to Jupiter is either we get in trouble, or they do. And if it's gonna be one or the other, I prefer it to be the other. And if I happen to be the one pointing trouble at a Chinaman through the sights of my rifle, then so much the better.

See, most Chinamen, they have no idea what life is like out here. They say, sure, it's colder here on the Phlogiston outpost than Walt Disney's dentures, and sure, you have to mine your water from Europa and sleep in a drawer like a corpse at the coroner's, but, hey, that's what you signed on for, so don't go complaining now, you no-good grass-is-greener Jovian. You just be grateful that we live in an age where radiation shielding and hydroponic farming and lax emigration laws have made it possible for you to be part of history! Imagine, being aboard Phlogiston: the most advanced Chinaman-made long-term residential satellite the solar system's ever known! Untold gazillions of yuan invested so that you could live orbiting Europa, just a Hail Mary away from Jupiter! They think to themselves: those ungrateful Jovians don't know how good they got it.

There are two types of Chinamen that'll risk their lives and travel the 5 or so AUs it takes to get here. Type one is emigrating, which means the poor bastard fucked up his real life and is coming to piece together an existence out here. When that happens, we'll find the poor bastard a good decent drawer they can sleep in and welcome him with all the Jovian hospitality you could want. But type two is a different species altogether. Type two is coming to tell us how to live our lives. I just love how they show up like Pizarro on pulque, looking to educate the

savages, talking about all the "crimes against humanity" we're committing. They just love to tell us what horrible people we are because they don't like our system of justice, or our reliance on slaves to get our water from Europa, or — and this one just kills me — the way we treat animals.

Someone someday has got to explain to me the brain of an animal rights Chinamen. These folks will spend a year in space each way — they wouldn't stay here for all the gold in the galaxy — risking everything they hold dear to their beating, bleeding hearts, just to make sure we're giving our dogs enough flea baths and our cats enough nip. Oh, I know their old standby argument: one of the principals on which Phlogiston was created was that it would serve as a refuge for all the flora and the fauna that Earth wasn't responsible enough to preserve on its own. That was a good enough idea: until it turned to twice-baked crap in practice. Fully two-thirds of Phlogiston is devoted to animals other than humans. They live better than humans do! They get all this open land with real grass and plants, and smaller animals to munch on, all very carefully managed by an army of biologists who shit their pants every time a prairie dog sneezes, while we're sleeping in file cabinets and showering in a communal bathhouse and eating in a communal mess that believe me lives up to its name.

And it's not even like we got just the practical beasts that would do us some good to have around. I'm glad for the cows and the chickens and the fish — even the fish, though they need so much goddamn water. You know why? Because they taste good and it's legal to eat them. But why do we have horses? Don't need to plow a hydroponic farm. Only things for a horse to do on Phlogiston are eat, shit, fuck and die. So I got to feed it, clean up after it, and dispose of its body when it's dead, and then raise all the new horses it made while it was getting its jollies and do it all over again.

And at least horses are beautiful, and are fun to ride and race, and have a share of human history to endear them to us. But explain to me a fucking tapir. We got a whole heap of tapirs on Phlogiston that we're not allowed to eat. Several thousand-head herds of delicious-looking

okapi, running around fast and free over the Astroturf savannah, that only the hyenas and lionesses are allowed to hunt. We Jovians get the short end when it comes to life of Phlogiston. And that ain't the way humans are built. We're engineered by Nature to rule other animals. We like to do it. We're made to do it. That's why we're in space on this crazy Chinaman-made planetoid in the first place: to rule even this, the most inhospitable environment God ever shat into the solar system.

So you know what? We Jovians rule Phlogiston the way we were meant to: when the Chinamen authorities aren't looking. I've had me more than one very fine tapir dinner, and a party just isn't a party without a whole roasted okapi as your centerpiece. We got an underground system where we take full advantage of the bounty that is here on Phlogiston. I've eaten more endangered species meals than I have legal ones, for the simple fact that endangered species are locally available and almost always cheaper than your standard farmyard fair, which is priced out of most peoples' budgets by — guess who? — profiteering Chinamen.

And even my own vocation takes advantage of our indigenous wildlife. See, we Jovians like modern medicine just as much as your college-educated Chinaman, but, just like your college-educated Chinaman, Jovians will pick a traditional remedy over a synthetic one nine times out of ten. So when Earth started to price-gouge us for the lotions and balms and tonics that are just as much a part of our culture as theirs, we took matters into our own hands. That's why the PandaPure Corporation, bottlers and distributors of natural Chinese remedies, is the most successful company ever to be born on Phlogiston. And it's why, as a matter of principle, of downright civil disobedience, that convinced me to supply them by opening my own bear-bile farm.

* * *

It's always the thing that no one expects. Ever notice that? No matter how much we learn or how much we think or how much we plan, it's always the thing that no one expects that gets us. The hardest thing about life on Phlogiston isn't the lack of space or lack of privacy or lack of fill in the blank. It's The Pull. It's the saddest, strangest, surprisingest thing about life here. See, we orbit just fine around Europa, and Europa orbits just fine around Jupiter: but Europa doesn't spin, and neither do we. The

Pull doesn't let us spin. We'll go years at a time without so much as a wobble, just facing forward towards Jupiter like a good third-grader. But then one day, thunk!, we flip, like we're trying to make up for all the time we haven't been spinning in one shot, and then both Europa and Phlogiston tumble together like God playing dice with the universe. We've bolted down anything that can't complain about it, so The Pull isn't so much about property damage; The Pull's about the living, because we aren't bolted down, and you never know how you're going to land when God craps out. Most of us just bump our heads or fall off the shitter and have a funny story to tell later, but it's a promise from the Lord that some of us won't land right. We lose dozens of Jovians every time we reorient: children and old folks mostly. And animals. Piles of dead mammals, most of which are endangered species already, end up in meaty cairns on the news feeds. Puts a tear in every Jovian eye, I'm here to tell you. Sure, most those animals will end up on the black market and on family dinner tables all over Phlogiston, but that doesn't mean we're happy about it. They're dead anyway. Meat's just gonna go to waste if we don't eat it. And we don't waste meat on Phlogiston.

But The Pull isn't just about catastrophes; The Pull affects you every waking day of your life. You feel it. Inside you, drawing at your most secretive innermost organs, subtly urging you toward Jupiter. I'm not a religious man, but I'd bet you every last bear on my farm that The Pull is exactly what true faith feels like. Imagine that Allah, instead of telling you to face Mecca when you pray, actually picked you up and turned you in the right direction, and you begin to get the idea. It's why we call ourselves Jovians, instead of Phlogistonians. It's Jupiter what's inside us. And you got something tugging at your insides, it's got to be either gravity or God. Most the time, you can't tell the difference.

But you can always tell a Chinaman who's new to Phlogiston. They're the ones who're always facing Jove-ward. Give 'em ten minutes, and, without even knowing it, they'll be turned toward Jupiter like idiots who can't even tell when they're being influenced by gravity. Or they get The Stumbles. They're not used to being pulled so hard in a direction by gravity other than down, and so they tend to list a little too far Jove-ward as they walk, until sometimes they stumble, and sometimes they almost trip but recover, and sometimes they just plain fall. Those important uppity-ups are here on official business, and

they can screw you sideways if they want to, so you don't really want to laugh at them when they're all sprawled out on the ground wondering when the hell did they forget how to walk. But I do anyways. Live free or die.

Take the time Ms. Winnimere Towson came to inspect my bear preserve. Well, really it's a bear-bile farm, but I have it registered with the Phlogiston municipality as a bear "preserve" on account of it being illegal as fuck to harvest bile from live bears. Ms. Towson was two full meters of yes-ma'am-thank-you-ma'am, with a business-casual bob that was meant to take some of the edge out of her face. She had on a gray skirt-suit she had to buy locally here — because there's no way they're going to let you travel in space for a year with a luxury like a tailored suit in your luggage — and it was a little snug for her, the skirt a little shorter than she would've liked, because we don't make our women quite so tall on Phlogiston, not with Jupiter's gravity pulling us every which way, and not with the monastic calorie count we have to survive on. And so, as I watched her government-issued pod pull up to my happy little bear farm, watched her stumble toward me, all the while leaning a little too far Joveward while trying to keep her skirt down to a less-than-pornographic tidemark, I laughed. That was a black black look she shot at me.

When she got to the gate, she reset her face to "professional neutral" again, reached into her jacket, pulled out an I.D. wallet and flashed me her P.A.P.A. credentials. "Special agent Winnimere Towson, Phlogiston Animal Protection Authority. I'm here to inspect this," and you could hear her adding the quote-marks around her words, "bear preserve."

So I put a few quotes around my words, too. "Special agent? You're a 'special' agent? Well, I'm mighty impressed that they didn't send just a regular old agent to come and visit my bears. This here's a real honor."

Dead-face. "Are you the legal owner and proprietor of this preserve?"

"Yes ma'am," I said, extending my hand. "Lee Song, at your service."

At least she had the decency to shake my hand, but it was all business, one pump and done. "Where are the bears, Mr. Song?"

"Around back. But can I offer you something first? A drink?"

"The bears, Mr. Song."

"Right this way."

I gallantly opened the gate for her and, removing my ball-cap, bowed as she passed through. She led the way. She was used to leading the way, you could tell, especially when dealing with Jovians. As I walked, my gun pressed against my hip with every step. I would really have liked to shoot her. But it was only a tranq gun I had on me, and so if I had shot her, then I just would have had to go get a real gun and shoot her again. And that seemed like a lot of trouble for a woman who wasn't going to find anything.

"This is quite a property you have here, Mr. Song," she said. "The PandaPure company sure has invested a lot in the success of this 'preserve,' haven't they? It must cost millions of yuan just to maintain it."

It was a beautiful property by even Chinaman standards. It was a half-kilometer lot covered end to end with real grass and a two-meter-deep bed of Earth-imported soil, with the peak of the Bear Mountain rising over my own private three-bedroom domicile, one and a half baths, full kitchen: it might as well have been the Taj Mahal for all the jealousy it generated round here. No sleeping in drawers for me or my bears. And she was right on: it costs millions of yuan to maintain. But I low-balled it: "Millions? No no, Special Agent Towson. Not that much."

"Don't be coy, Mr. Song. Even though I've only been on Phlogiston a few days, I know how much a place like this costs here. What do you think alerted me here to your 'preserve' in the first place?"

"You haven't told me that, Agent Towson, so of course I haven't the slightest clue. General inspection?"

She wheeled on me, the same way a bear will turn on you if you go a little light on the sedatives: "Not likely. We both know this is no bear preserve, Mr. Song. We both know you're illegally harvesting ursodeoxycholic acid from these bears. You're a bear-bile farmer for PandaPure, and I'm here to get the evidence I need to close you down."

My face went somewhere between shock and insult. I'd practiced the expression in front of the mirror for a long time, just so at a moment like this I could countenance it without a thought. "Now, Ms. Towson, I like my traditional remedies just as much as any Chinaman. Why, I've done me a fair bit of study on the four essences and the five flavors and the four directions of action in traditional Chinese medicine. Know thy enemy, right? But to accuse me of harming the very creatures I have rescued"

"It's only an accusation until I find the evidence I need. Then it becomes a fact. I'm here to turn my accusations into fact, Mr. Song. And I am quite sure that very shortly I will have all the evidence I need."

She talked tough, but I knew she was posturing. After all, she came alone: which means they didn't have enough evidence to just come here SWAT-style and take me away and close things down for good. PandaPure lawyers were scary enough to keep even the government awake at night with worrying, so P.A.P.A. wasn't going to act until it had an airtight case. She was sent here to rattle me, break me down, try to shake lose a smoking gun that she could take to the court room in a little plastic baggie and use to shut down PandaPure once and for all.

But Special Agent Winnimere Towson was generically incapable of rattling me. "Agent Towson, ma'am, I sure hope for your sake you have other business on Phlogiston than just me, because you're going to find that this is just a place where bears who used to live on bile farms now come to live the rest of their days in peace and happiness. You Chinamen never can get your stories straight, can you?"

She got in my face. I can't say I didn't enjoy it a little. "Mr. Song, I am neither Chinese nor a man, and so I would appreciate it if you would keep your sexist, anti-Earthling comments to yourself."

"I most sincerely apologize, Ms. Towson. Out here, we consider the phrase 'Chinaman' a term of endearment. Kind of like 'moron' or 'retard.'"

"How is 'retard' a term of endearment?"

"See, that's just it. On Phlogiston, we love our retards."

Ooh, that got her good. She went bruise-black in the face and said, "Let's see how smug you are when I have the evidence I need to put you on an ice-harvesting chain-gang for the rest of your life." And she spun around and walked off to go and find that evidence. Only she spun a little too fast, and Jupiter almost pulled her to the ground. She recovered only just in time.

She got to the moat behind my house that cordoned off the bear habitat from the rest of the property. There were three of my honeys — Rhoda, Atlas, and Lacey — sunning themselves along the edge; they all three perked up when they saw me, smelling at us and making hospitable little grunts. "Hey there, honeys!" I yelled to them. "How're my honeys doing?"

I continued to sweet-talk my honey-bears, but out of

the corner of my eye I was watching Agent Towson. She was looking disappointed, which is just how I wanted her to look. I said out loud what I knew she was thinking: "As you can see, Agent Towson, these bears are roaming free and happy in their habitat. Bears on those bile farms, they keep them in cages so small the bear can't even move. Makes it easier to stick a tube into their abdomens and tap their gall bladders. Or maybe they're using the 'free drip' method, where you make a permanent wound in the bear's belly and the bile just leaks onto a collecting pan underneath the cage. Either way, you got to have caged and wounded and suffering bears to collect the bile. And my bears are healthy and free to go where they please."

"These are just your fronts. You have bears in cages somewhere on this property. And so help me, I will find them."

"Well then," I said, yelling over my shoulder as I scrambled down the side of the moat. "Let's not waste your time then. I reckon you'll want to have a look at Bear Mountain over yonder, since that's the most likely candidate for a hiding place." I climbed the built-in ladder on the other side of the moat, which put me smack in the middle of my three happy honey-bears. They all got up from their lounging to greet me and get some nice ear-scratching.

I looked back and saw Agent Towson hadn't budged. I acted surprised: "Special Agent Towson, what are you still doing over there? This is what you came to see, right? Come on over!"

She hesitated. "You have those bears trained." I could see in her face that she suddenly realized maybe it wasn't such a good idea to come here alone. "You could order them to attack me."

I laughed. "Attack you? Why, these poor honeys wouldn't hurt a fly! Not anymore, anyways. See, those years they spent in those tiny cages on the bile-farms, well, it caused their muscles to atrophy something terrible. It took a lot recombinant regeneration therapy and even more TLC just to get them to walk again. And look here," I said, while grabbing Lacey's jaws and gently opening them. "See that? They yanked out most of these bears' teeth on those farms so they wouldn't get hurt while doing their evil work. Declawed them too. So no muscle, no teeth, and no claws. You're perfectly safe!" I gave Lacey a treat from my pocket, and she gently gummed her way around it and gave me a look of thanks.

Special Agent Towson wasn't dressed for climbing up and down moats: her blouse kept unbuttoning itself and her skirt kept trying to launch itself over her head. Not that I minded. She had to give up on her shoes entirely: she threw them over to our side of the habitat — as they flew, you could see the hook a little Joveward — and crab-walked down into the moat. Atlas went over and smelled those shiny, businessy pumps of hers, but then, either out of disgust or boredom, he turned away and re-joined the other bears and me. Agent Towson climbed up the ladder, got her shoes back on, straightened her skirt, rebuttoned her blouse, and combed her hair briefly with her fingers. "Okay," she said. "I'm here. Do your worst."

"Okee doke," I said, and made for Bear Mountain. The three bears walked alongside me, Lacey sniffing after the treats she now knew I had in my pocket; Towson walked slightly behind us. When we got to the entrance of the tunnel, I took out my flask and charged my batteries, offered it to Agent Towson, who refused it, and then gave her a history of the habitat, "This is Bear Mountain. I built it myself, stone by stone; the materials were of course donated by PandaPure. It's basically a pile of rocks with a tunnel running through the center so they have a place to sleep and get out of the sun if they want to. That's where most of the bears are now, as you can see: Gina and Roadkill and Xiu Jin and Pook and Texas and Yin-Yang and Sylvia and Tenderfoot and Chen and Madeleine and Bronson and Nghien, poor skinny Nghien who cuts my heart in half every time I look at him."

"You can see that there's a running supply of water on the right: that's one of the most expensive parts of this entire operation. They came to me conditioned not to hibernate, so they eat twice a day all year round. Their diet's vegetarian, but I mix in extra vitamins and powdered protein to make sure they're getting everything they need, especially the newer arrivals. And I give them their regeneration therapy medicine four times a week. Like I said, they come to me with horrible wounds and muscles so atrophied they can barely stand, and so they get the finest recombinant regeneration therapies available to them, all funded by PandaPure. They will still be playing catch-up all the rest of their lives, but thanks to PandaPure's commitment to these bears, they'll live better than anyone could have hoped for." I sighed. "They're a good bunch of bears. I have the best job in the solar system."

"You're certain they won't attack me?"

"I'm positive, Ms. Towson. After you?"

She smiled for the first time that day, then walked into the tunnel. She pulled something that looked like a really expensive PDA out of her jacket pocket, and started using it to scan the walls and floor of the tunnel. "What you got there, Ms. Towson?" I asked.

"I'm looking to see if you have any bears hidden behind the walls or in a secret basement or something."

"Well, go right on ahead and look. You won't find anything."

As we got closer to the center of the tunnel, where the least light penetrated and the temperature was coolest, Pook, Tenderfoot and Nghien walked over to greet us, while Rhoda decided she'd had enough exercise for now and plopped herself next to the water pool. Special Agent Towson was intensely scanning the walls, and she was getting pissed off at not finding anything. I thought it'd be a good time to piss her off a little more. "Those fancy satellites that you've no doubt used to photograph my preserve a hundred times by now would've picked up anything hidden underground or in the walls, wouldn't they? I don't understand why they'd make you come all this way to scan the walls with a hand-held device that can't possibly do as good a job."

She wheeled on me again. Apparently, wheeling around was something she liked to do to people. "I'm here, Mr. Song, because our satellites didn't pick up anything, and yet we know you are guilty. This preserve is entirely financed by a generous grant from PandaPure, the corporation that just happens to use the most animals derivatives in their products in the entire solar system — including ursodeoxycholic acid. We know PandaPure operates out of Phlogiston so that it can get away with animal cruelty violation that would never be tolerated on Earth. And we're here to put a stop to it. And you're the key to our efforts, Mr. Song. Once we figure out how you and people like you are getting ursodeoxycholic acid to PandaPure, we will complete the evidence chain that, with any luck, will ... bring down ... the ... entire ... corpora ... tion."

She had started her little speech with her typical arrogance, but as I started walking toward her with five bears in tow, her voice lost its disrespectful edge. As her eyes jumped from bear to bear, I said to her, "You know what, Ms. Towson? I'm getting a little tired of you Chinamen, with your grand conspiracy theories about how we evil Jovians are hell-bent on hurting animals just for

the sake of yuan. You know, you're not the first P.A.P.A. agent to come around to harass me. Sure as clockwork, I see one of you jokers every few months. You come snooping around here with your accusations and your fancy bear-detectors — but you know what they all leave with? Nothing but a mouth full of crow.

"You know why PandaPure funds these preserves? It's because they as a corporation have pledged to help put a stop to illegal bile-farming, and they've put their money where their mouth is. You can't find a corporation that's more animal-friendly than they are. Not only do they give these rescued bears a beautiful place to live, not only do they pay for the food and the water and the maintenance and my salary, but every single bear they rescue gets recombinant regeneration therapy. Every last one! They pay millions of yuan every year to literally undo the bodily harm these bears have gone through.

"Here," I said, and I reached down and scratched Nghien on his chest. He took the cue and stood on his hind legs, and, even in the bad light of the tunnel, a scarred and white patch of bald skin was plainly visible. I pointed at the bald-patch. "See that? Poor Nghien here had been suffering for many years, getting his gall bladder milked twice daily by those bile-farming bastards. By the time PandaPure found him, he was almost dead: they were literally about to cut him up for parts. He was so far gone that even 50 years ago there wouldn't be a lot to do for him except make his last few weeks as pain-free as possible. But this is now: PandaPure stepped up and paid for cutting-edge regeneration therapy. Thanks to them, he's made a remarkable recovery. Sure, he's a little skinny by bear standards, and his muscles will never be what they were, but what we have here, Special Agent Towson, is a healthy, happy bear, all thanks to PandaPure.

"You know what I think? I think it's because PandaPure is the most successful company on Phlogiston — so successful that it can go toe-to-toe with your Chinaman companies — that you all are so hell-bent on destroying it. Now that we got PandaPure, selling us our natural remedies and health-care products here at home, you Chinamen can't charge us a month's salary for them, and that just drives you all nuts, doesn't it? And you have the gall to come here and accuse us of misconduct? You disgust me."

"Mr. Song, I am feeling unsafe," said Agent Towson. She had backed up completely against the wall and was on the balls of her feet, and her shoulders were gathered

around her ear lobes. And she had reason to be afraid: my bears had been feeding off the tone of my tirade and were looking at Agent Towson like she might not be welcome in their home anymore. So I acted quickly to diffuse the situation: I started whooping and scratching and boxing some bear ears. "Yeah, honeys! Who're my honeys? Who are the best damn bears in the world?" They responded immediately: they started grunting happily and putting their paws up to defend against me and giving me a few play nips. Nghien got behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders and licked my ear like a lover. "Oh, who's a good boy?" I said and reached around to scratch the back of his head.

I turned back to Special Agent Towson, who was looking a little more relaxed, but only a little. "You were never in any danger," I said, removing my baseball cap penitently, "on my honor. But I still want to sincerely apologize. It was never my intention to make you uncomfortable. I'm just getting a little tired of being accused of things is all. And if I get a little defensive about PandaPure, well, it's because I see how much good they're doing and how little credit they get for it. Anyway, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," said Agent Towson. She combed her hair with her fingers and refastened a blouse button. Working very hard to show me she was back in control again, she added. "I think it's time you showed me your financial records."

"They're in the house. Right this way, ma'am." I undid Nghien's arms from my shoulders the way I might unfasten a cloak, and then walked her over to the house.

* * *

Special Agent Towson spent several hours studying my ledger and accounting records, and asked me to make hundreds of copies for her. I did so with a smile, and brought her lemonade and what I told her was a chicken-salad sandwich, but what really was an ostrich-salad sandwich that she wouldn't of eaten if I hadn't lied. I'm pretty sure that Agent Towson, for all her obvious faults, wasn't a hypocrite, and that she would have refused to eat the meat of any endangered animal: and ostriches don't even exist on Earth anymore. But everything I had in the fridge was endangered. And I didn't want her to go hungry.

When she finished with my books and her sandwich, she thanked me for my cooperation, gave me her card,

told me that, should I learn that PandaPure was involved in any illegal operations, I was legally obliged to contact her immediately, shook my hand — one pump and done — and got in her pod and scooted off. I stood by the gate and waived my cap in the air as she left.

I waited until she was long gone before I firmly put my cap back on and headed back to the bear habitat to do a little farming; spending all morning with a pompous P.A.P.A agent always got me in the mood. I power-walked over to the habitat and scrambled through the moat, then half-jogged over to Bear Mountain. Nghien. He was the one I wanted. When I was putting on that show for Special Agent Towson using his scar, I noticed that he was ready for farming again. That little bald patch of his bulges ever so slightly when his gall bladder's grown back in fully. Kind of like a pregnancy.

I went in the tunnel and walked up to Nghien, drawing my pistol. "Nghien!" I exclaimed. "Here boy! Look what Daddy's got for you!" while waiving the gun around.

Nghien perked up his head when he heard his name, but once he saw the gun, he joyously galumphed over to me. He made happy grunting noises and rubbed his face against the gun, and then looked up at me as if to ask, "Well, what are you waiting for, buddy?" And I wasn't waiting for a thing, so I pressed the gun against the back of his neck and shot him with a tranq dart.

In less than 20 seconds he was high. He got woozy and dreamy, and, just like I had trained him, rolled on his back to enjoy his drug-induced freak-out. It would last for hours, and in the meantime he wouldn't feel a thing. I pulled out my knife and my flask and poured a generous amount of booze over the blade, got it nice and drunk. Poured some over the bald patch, and took a swig for myself for good measure, then went to work. The key is to apply smooth and steady pressure, keeping a straight line and making as small an incision as possible. I'd cut Nghien open so many times here, he hardly even bled, and his old scar served as the perfect guide as to exactly how big a cut I needed to make to fit in my hand. That done, I reached in and gently pulled his gall bladder out in the open air; it was easier to make the needed cuts outside of his body. I'd only leave enough of it behind so it would grow itself back in a week or so, and thanks to advancements in recombinant regeneration therapy, that meant I could slice off most of it with no ill effects. Two quick cuts and the bladder was mine.

I dropped the knife, carefully tucked the remaining

nub back through the incision with my free hand, then pulled a baggie out of my pocket and, careful not to lose any bile, placed the gall bladder inside it. I sealed it and stuck it in my pocket. Then took a seat beside Nghien and pinched the incision shut for several minutes. I watched his face as I waited for the wound to seal itself: his eyes were open, and he was breathing normally, and he had a sly, toothless bear-grin on his face. He'd never miss the hunk of gall bladder I'd cut out of him. I let go of the incision; it had closed enough to be left to itself now; in another two hours it would just be another slight scar on the bald spot.

I picked up the knife, wiped it, stowed it, and headed back to the house to get the gall bladder ready for shipping. As I held it up to the light, I discovered that this one was actually a little smaller than I had expected it to be. Even so, PandaPure would pay me enough yuan for it to cover my operating expenses for the entire month: any other gall bladders I harvested for the next thirty days would be pure gravy.



Bio: Carlos Hernandez is a writer of speculative and literary fiction with one SFWA-recognized Pro publication to his credit so far, which appeared in *Interzone* in Jan. 2006. He also has a semi-pro publication in *Interzone*, as well as paid publications from *Neo-Opsis*, *Written Word* and the novella anthology *The Amityville House of Pancakes*, Vol. II. Alas, the literary world isn't nearly as good as the genre fiction world about paying its writers, and so his other publications, in places such as *Happy*, *Fiction International*, *Opium*, *The Journal of Experimental Fiction*, and several others, have not yielded any remuneration. Carlos is, however, eagerly awaiting his first royalty check for his co-written, highly experimental novel, *Abecedarium*, published by Chiasmus Press in 2007.

DRAGON RIDGE

by Eric Turowski

I.

MOTION CUT THE LIGHT. Irons opened his eyes. He found himself recumbent on a hard surface, his immediate area black as pitch with dim light streaming through an uneven opening. The air smelled of fresh rain, cold mist lingering.

Again, a shadow blocked the light, moving smoothly before dropping away. Instinct told him not to move, that even a slight shift might cause the double length of drive chain he wore through the loops in his jeans to jingle, the shafts of his harness boots to creak.

The moon shifted several degrees with no further sign of the visitor. Silently, he crossed the uneven floor of a cave, the inside strewn with litter. Near the entrance, a Harley stood, the shape of pursuit blinkers and a siren on the front fender in silhouette. It started to come back to his still-sleeping brain.

The Police Special had belonged to rural cops in a tiny Sierra foothills town, where the force was a hundred years past retirement and only worked the night shift. He escaped on one of their bikes, a '59 dresser--modern equipment for that department.

He fled, trying to put more than a night's ride between himself and the pigs. Even undead cops could put out a BOLO. His nearest friend ran a chop shop in Bishop. But a few miles along a nameless mountain road, his plans changed. He intended to drop the cop special off a high cliff and into the pines below. But as the sun dipped behind the surrounding peaks, Irons saw aspens painted with strobing red. He recognized the old-fashioned police gumballs. Sunset came early in the mountains, and the night shift cops were hot on his trail, trolling the parallel highway.

He slowed, eyes peering into the deepening dark. An old dirt logging road branched off, overgrown and nearly invisible. He took it though it was no place for a thousand-pound Harley.

Twenty minutes in, after two switchbacks, erosion erased the path. In scattered moonlight, his eyes caught a trail leading into the scrub. Branches from tall brush scraped at the late chief's bike, wheels occasionally sink-

ing into mud. But Irons was soon rewarded by the sight of a cut into a steep slope. He rode the hog up an undulated slope and into the cave, the mouth barely wide enough to fit the police bike. A dozen yards in, a rockslide ended the man-made cut. He shut off the motor, hearing it echo in the stone throat. A crude bench sat against the wall. Irons stretched out, boots hanging over the edge.

Not knowing how long he slept, he crouched at the lip of the cave, listening. A few yards away, the bush began weaving in a path away from him. He thought of coyotes, but no footfall in the leaves could be heard. A second, silent path of motion paralleled the first. Straining his ears, Irons heard a steady dragging sound.

Almost too late, he realized that the sound came from directly above. Ducking against the wall, he watched a dark mass moved downward, covering the opening.

Slithering and scraping, the eclipsing presence continued for many heartbeats, giving only the impression of motion. Finally, a blunt end slid past, the cave lighting again as it departed.

Irons gazed down the slope. Dark and glistening, a shape undulated down the rolling slope and disappeared. A few seconds went by, then another path of motion again shook the scrub.

He'd been in some scrapes before--strange scrapes few people would believe. But anything that could block a cave big enough for a hog was something he didn't want to mess with.

Time passed, he saw no motion in the scrub. The cut was too narrow to turn the cop bike around--he had planned on leaving it. Even on wheels, a half-ton of motorcycle was a burden. Sweating, he finally backed the hog outside. Rain left the highlands dotted with jewels of precipitation that glittered in the moonlight and left the path a muddy wreck.

Mounting, he rolled down the rocky slope, then kicked the bike to life. Slow and easy, wheels frequently losing purchase, he made his way toward the road. Eyes sweeping the bush, he saw no sign of movement. Too late, Irons saw the trail blocked and he plowed through a high pile of whitish, greenish stuff.

The bike skittered out from under him, dumping

Irons into the pile. Slime clung to his vest, his jeans, his arms. It smelled like a combination of rotten meat and ammonia. Gagging, he wiped himself clean. Something crunched beneath his boot, and it looked familiar. To be certain, Irons nudged it with the toe of his boot. Although cracked nearly in half, there was no denying the shape of a human skull.

In disgust, he backed away. Moving toward the motorcycle, he heard the engine still running. How he was going to pick up the bike, he didn't know. And then it didn't matter.

A black, bullet shape extruded from the brush, mouth grabbing the handlebars. He could make out a dark blue, glossy color to the enormous, worm-like thing, a huge bony collar behind a blunt head, in place of eyes, weird tentacles waved.

Frozen, he saw another enormous, glossy snake dart in. The creatures pulled the rear tire in one direction, the forks in another, ripping the bike apart in a shower of sparks and a shriek of metal. The frame dropped to the ground, V-twin roaring and sputtering in protest. Dropping their prizes, the worm-like monsters pounced on the motor, massive forms bending steel.

The third one undulated down the path, branches and leaves whisking against its lustrous skin. Ignoring Irons, the creature fell on its brothers, fighting over the motor.

Irons fled down the path in blind fear, not caring where he ended up. Behind him, pistons screamed to a halt as the engine died. Irons raced along the path, boots sliding, breath coming hard. When the slithering sound followed, he ran for his life.

Irons was a big man, over six-and-a-half feet tall; his long legs could cover a lot of ground in a hurry. But the slithering pursuit kept pace, and even started to get louder as the grade steepened. Pounding along in his boots, he began to pray for the path to descend. Heart ready to burst, lungs a conflagration, he powered on.

Cresting the steep hill, he poured it on going down the other side. It smashed into his legs. Crashing into the brush, he rolled over and over, down the incline with a shout, finally gaining his feet and running. Moments later, his feet were swept out from under him again.

Somersaulting into a tree, sparks flew before his eyes. They could not block the sight of the bullet-headed worm that reared up. Lunging, eel-like mouth wide, its nightmare head blurred. Irons nearly dodged it, but the side of its head landed like a sledgehammer. He saw the

ground rise to meet him, the freakish head rise to strike, then blackness.

II.

"I know you're awake, so you might as well open your eyes." A woman's voice addressed him with a slight southern drawl. Irons had been trying to catch a glimpse of the feet he heard crunching in the leaf litter for a while from beneath his lashes. The voice also had an official ring. That boded ill. He opened his eyes, squinting in the afternoon sun--he'd been out for a while. Her brown uniform tried to conceal the fact that she was an attractive woman. He openly admired her figure, especially her wide hips. A gun rested on the right one.

"Eight years in college, and I end up chasing scallywags around the forest." She sighed. "Your name, sir?"

She was some kind of cop. He refused to show his unease. "They call me Tire-iron."

"Tire-iron?"

He grinned. "Wanna know why?"

"Mr. Tire-iron, this talk might be appropriate for your tough-guy tea parties and such, but this isn't the time."

"It's Irons."

"And without the sad attempt at flirting, what are you doing here, Mr. Irons? You tie one on at the roadhouse and end up taking a tumble?"

"I don't drink. I do tumble."

"You'll have to come with me, sir."

He tried to rise, and found his hands cuffed behind him. Grunting, he lunged to his feet, towering over the ranger.

"I apologize, but you seemed, how do I put this politely? Somewhat dangerous." With her left thumb, she hooked the chain dangling over her shoulder--his "belt," a double length of drive chain.

She was right to take it--he'd busted countless skulls with it. "What if I'm more dangerous when my pants fall down?"

"For your sake, you might want to stop thinking of me as a girl in the woods and start thinking of me as a special agent for the U.S. National Parks Service, okay?"

He smirked. "Yes, ma'am."

She indicated north with a motion of her head. "Jeep's that way. You want to tell me what you're doing here?"

"It's a long story."

"It's a fair piece to the Jeep."

He started walking, the ranger falling in step behind him. "Answer me one question first. What's a special agent doing out here?"

"That's none of your concern, Mr. Irons."

"It's a fair piece to the Jeep," he said.

She sighed. "There have been problems around Dragon Ridge, and we're seeing to them. Your turn."

"Problems," he mused. "People gone missing? Animal mutilations, like that?"

Behind him, he heard her feet stop for a second. "What do you know about it?"

In spite of the fact that she was taking him in, something about her demeanor said he could trust her. "Last night, I saw something pretty unusual."

"Do tell."

How to put it without sounding like a lunatic? "They were animals, kinda like snakes, kinda like worms. Dark blue. They didn't have eyes, tentacles sticking out from their heads. Ever heard of that?"

"They're called caecilians. But they're tropical, mostly subterranean, and they don't get bigger than five feet."

"Five feet?" He grunted. The things must've been forty feet long. "Three of them, near a railroad or quarry cut. I found bones in some scat. Made my bike slide."

"Unh-huh. That how you got banged up, falling off a bike?"

He was losing her. "One of them smashed into me. I was pretty sure I was dead."

"Dead drunk, maybe."

"I don't drink."

"But you do tumble. I see that now."

"Let me show you? I'm positive some of the bones were human. But you should probably take a look."

The ranger said nothing for a while until they finally reached the Jeep. His reflection in the window showed a bruise covering his entire left arm. She opened the back door, guided him inside. Then she circled around the vehicle to the rear, opening the trunk. To his surprise, she entered with a drum-loaded shotgun, holding it carefully in view while she spoke. "I don't know what you saw last night, Mr. Irons, but I don't have a whole lot else to go on. So we'll check out your scat with bones in it. If you're pulling my chain, I'll see to it that you are left in an uncomfortable room for a very long time before we ship you to a federal lockup. Are we clear on this?"

The special agent worked in the wild. He could sense that she knew something was very wrong in the protected

wilderness. "As a mountain stream," he said.

III.

The drive back took more than an hour, most of it on impossible hairpin turns he wouldn't want to tackle with the longest forks. They drove through a construction site near the summit of Little White Mountain. Workers waved as the special agent passed.

"What's going on there?"

"Fire protection cistern. No hydrants out here."

At the sound of loud pounding, he turned his head to see a drill rig in operation high on a ridge. Vibrations shook the Jeep, making it feel like they were riding on flat tires.

The ranger drove another set of hairpin turns, rounding the mountain. Above the deep scrub, Irons saw the cut into the cliff wall. "That's it."

Leaving him in the Jeep, the ranger got out and looked in the cave. After a moment, she came back. "It's illegal to bring motorcycles on the trail, Mr. Irons."

He grunted.

With the pistol grip of the shotgun pressed against her hip, she frowned. Irons knew she weighed whether it was better to leave him in the car, which he might steal if he could get free, or take him along, putting herself in possible danger. Then, she opened the door. "Slowly, please."

Levering himself out of the Jeep, he nodded toward the scrub field. "They went through there, probably left a trail."

"Don't go anywhere, Mr. Irons." She moved into the bush, eyes sweeping back and forth. "Nothing more pathetic than a handcuffed man running through the woods."

The ranger moved behind a line of low trees. He could make a break for it, but she was right. It would be a pathetic attempt. Her footsteps in the weeds diminished, but a few minutes later, she said, "What a pile of crap."

She didn't believe him. Any hope of her freeing him evaporated. She'd take him to the nearest ranger station, and it wouldn't take long before he was tied to the apparent murder of a cop in the foothills. "Shit."

The ranger came back into sight, her face pale and drawn in anger. "Turn around," she ordered. Irons fully expected the pistol grip of the shotgun to come down on his head before she called in the dogs. Instead, he felt her unlock the cuffs. When he turned back, he saw that her

face was not angry, but frightened.

"I've seen smaller piles of elephant dung." Then she looked up at him. "Show me."

He led her down the path he'd tried to follow the previous night, the mud now dry. And there it was, a white crust growing over the top, a swarm of flies audible from several feet away, tire tracks bisecting the pile, and the cracked skull.

Crouching down, she fished around for a stick, then turned the skull over. "Prominent supraorbital ridges, big mastoid process--I'd say this was a man."

"Men have gone missing in the park?"

She brushed large flesh flies away, standing up. "No, from the roadhouse on Highway 6. It's less than a mile, as the crow flies."

Irons turned in the direction she indicated. You'd have to be a crow to go that way, the slopes of the peaks nearly sheer, bare rock.

"We'll have to evacuate the area. Shouldn't be too hard to do on a Tuesday evening." She took a brick-sized radio off her belt. "Romeo Foxtrot, this is Sierra Adam One." There was no response. The ranger headed back toward the Jeep. "Romeo Foxtrot, come back."

"Sierra Adam, where you been? Highway 6 is code 12 at Dragon Ridge, copy?"

She depressed the mic button. "Do you require assistance, over."

"Negative special agent, CHP's on scene. No vehicles in lot twelve. But if your 20's west of Little White, you'll have a long drive, over."

"10-4 Romeo Foxtrot."

"All units, 10-23 until further notice."

She turned the radio down. "A landslide," she told Irons.

"Not because of the rain."

She shook her head. "The ground isn't saturated. But if your description of these animals is accurate, they mostly live underground. And if they're as big as their scat indicates--"

Irons wasn't buying it. "Those things are too big to burrow."

"This is just a guess, but I'd say they didn't start out that way. Soil in the valleys is deep, thousands of feet deep in some places. Food would be limited, of course, but the caecilians, even the biggest ones we know of, could survive without ever being discovered. Something must be luring them to the surface, where there's more

prey, greater oxygenation."

Irons nodded. "They get bigger."

"Worse, once they reach a certain size, they can't return to subterranean habitats. They can't run down faster prey, either."

He got it. Slower prey, like people.

"I'm going to get some samples, get a team of zoologists out here so we can figure out what to do."

"What to do?" Irons said in amazement. "You'll have to kill those things."

"I'm a ranger first and foremost, and I have to protect the environment."

Irons grunted, folding his arms. "What about the visitors? Don't they come first?"

"Yes, that's why I'm closing the park. The construction site, too." She didn't speak for a moment, thinking. "Big caecilians don't exist in the fossil record, at least, not the ones with the limbless adaptation. They have to be studied. The earliest ones, stegocephalia, are thought to be a link between land-dwelling amphibians and bony fish. We might answer a lot of questions about evolution."

Irons didn't argue. Instead, he watched the sun moving toward the range with some trepidation.

The ranger and he walked back to the jeep. She set the shotgun in the trunk and came out with several bags and jars and two pairs of rubber gloves.

"If you help me with this, we can get leave sooner. It's a long, slow drive over the mountain. I'd rather not do it after sunset."

Irons frowned at the fly-swarmed mound. "I'm not trained for this."

"Just put different colored shit in each jar. Sing out if you find more bones."

It wasn't like he hadn't already rolled around in it. Trying not to make a face, he scooped samples into jars. The enforcement ranger put the skull in a black body bag. Rooting around with a stick, she pulled out several bones, ribs they looked like. These went into the bag as well.

"Your theory, about these caecilians coming up from below and getting stuck."

She looked at him. "What about it?"

"Would they be nocturnal, living underground?"

"Not necessarily. But they'd need to shelter from the sun to keep their skin from drying out." She stopped talking. "So they would be more active at night. Sun sets pretty quick up here."

Tossing everything in the trunk, she made ready to

close it. Irons stopped her, pointing to the shotgun. The special agent grabbed it, and they took off.

The sun slid behind the range, but as they rose up the switchbacks, they drove out of the shadow and into daylight. But before they reached the construction site, they swerved back across the terminus into evening.

"Oh my God."

Irons saw the destruction as she pulled into the clearing used as a parking lot. The drilling rig was bent in half, yards of steel cable dangling. The truck it rested on had a cab flattened to two dimensions, front tires blown.

The ranger leapt from the car, charging toward the scene.

"Wait!" Irons tried to stop her. He saw his chain on the seat, and snatched it up, following her. The sight of a body nearly made him pause. It had been bitten in half, legs and lower torso laying right side up outside the car, upper body upside down several feet away.

The ranger was already at the excavation site. Irons walked up the hill to join her.

"I think they came out here," she said, quietly. Long, curving tracks cut through the soil and gravel outside the excavation, leading from the brush several yards away.

Shotgun ready, she crouched down. "You can tell the direction by the kickback of the dirt in the track. They're big as dragons."

"Hey! Hey, help!"

The shout came from the other side of the site. Irons and the ranger moved quickly, scaling a mound of soil. On the other side, a man lay in a deep culvert. Even from several yards above, Irons could see the man had two broken legs.

"Help! I'm down here! Call a paramedic!"

The ranger shook her head. "We can't get him out of there ourselves. I'll have to call in a chopper." She reached for her radio.

"Please! Those things, they ate Stan, they killed Mike and Darren!" He started to sob, but his voice was loud, echoing off naked stone. "Help me!" The man in the steep-walled ditch screamed, his words made unintelligible by pain.

"I need medevac at the cistern excavation site, do you copy, Romeo Sierra?"

"Help meeee!"

Irons looked to the opposite edge of the culvert as the man's scream suddenly became terrified. Polished blue skin rose with amazing speed from a bend in the ditch.

The ranger aimed the shotgun and fired. Across the twelve-foot gap, the caecilian jerked --but it hardly slowed down. Slithering forward, the tentacles on the sides of its head wiggled, testing the air.

"Goddamn it," the ranger swore. She fired, and fired, the street sweeper delivering seven shots in a row.

Irons saw only one shot go wide. It blasted a huge chip of rock from the opposite face with a ricocheting whine.

"There's nothing you can do!" Irons shouted, but she folded out the stock, pressed it to her shoulder and started a second barrage. Another five rounds exploded, the target jerking with every shot, but its rubber-like resilience seemed bulletproof. Irons saw wounds in the cobalt skin, revealing glistening white scales like chain mail.

"I've put twelve slugs in it! I don't know what to do!"

The caecilian slithered its thirty-foot body through the ditch. On the sides of its head, the tentacles waved in all directions. When the injured man screamed again, it lurched forward, huge jaw hinged open. In an instant, the screaming stopped as the monstrous snake bit down. Blood sprayed the walls of the culvert.

Irons caught motion in the corner of his eye. He spun around just in time to see a blue mass rising from the ground. He leapt, carrying the ranger a few yards in a flying tackle. Behind them, the second caecilian smashed into the ground, sending dirt and gravel spitting. Convulsively, its jaw worked, and though Irons' ears were deadened by the shotgun concussion, he heard the grinding of rock as the thing masticated.

They scrambled to their feet. Point blank, the ranger aimed at the caecilian's head. The creature reared back. She fired again, a rubbery chunk of blue skin flying away. Opalescent scales quivered beneath the wound. It wasn't enough. It lunged.

With lightning reflexes, Irons shoved her aside. The strike missed the ranger by inches, but plowed into Irons, and sent him flying.

Air knocked out of him, he got to his knees. He was behind the thing; the ranger in front of it. Between, the smooth-skinned behemoth wavered, head swaying back and forth like a cobra--the twitching glands writhing from its eye sockets.

Irons suddenly understood. The tentacles sensed vibration--that's how they hunted beneath the ground. He held up a hand, putting a finger to his lips.

The ranger ignored him, firing more rounds into the monster's eyeless face. The dragon struck. As it opened

its mouth, she emptied the final rounds from the drum clip.

It proved softer on the inside. In spasms, the monster curled in on itself, tossing large stones in its wake. In seconds, it lay still.

The enforcement ranger dropped to her knees. Sweat and tears poured from her face, her breathing came in huge, ragged gulps. Every part of Irons hurt as he rose to his feet and made his way to her side.

"You okay?"

"No. And I won't be until we kill all these bastards."

Irons nodded. He didn't remind her that not long before, she wanted to protect the animals for study. Life-or-death situations could change a person's attitude.

"I have another drum clip in the Jeep."

He stopped her. "We need help, here. You have to call some people in."

"Like I could get someone to believe me, even if the radio worked up here?"

Tell me about it, he thought. But he said, "Make something up. But get more people, more guns--"

"I don't need more people to kill a couple amphibians!" she shouted. "And they'll take the same attitude that I did, at first. That they should be captured, or corralled. Forget it! We take all of 'em out right now. You said there were three, and one's dead, and one's in that gully. When it comes up, I'll shove this street sweeper right down its throat if I have to--"

The caecilian suddenly reared from the deep culvert, moving like lightning. The monster lunged at her, wide mouth open, and swallowed her whole.

Gone. She was gone.

Wiggling its bizarre antennae, the caecilian turned toward him. Irons couldn't move.

IV.

It had happened to him before, someone dying horribly in front of him. And each time, he felt the same immobility, mind numb, muscles frozen, the only awareness the furious pump of his heartbeat. All that remained of the pretty special agent was a puddle of blood, drooled from the mouth of the caecilian. Suddenly, he realized he never even learned her name.

His heartbeat seemed loud in the gathering night. Could it hear?

Then, Irons turned his head in concert with the blind

snake. A distant, deep pulse drifted in the night. In a moment, Irons picked up the beat. It must be coming from the roadhouse. A band, or a DJ.

Rearing like a viper, the third caecilian rose from the scrub, scanning the air with vibration tentacles. As one, they flattened out, slithering and sidewinding toward the drums with amazing speed.

As he came to himself, survival instinct prompted flight as far away as he could get. He would have to be quiet. Attacks occurred at the drill rig, or when he was running all out, boot heels pounding the soil, or when the worker screamed, or when the ranger fired the shotgun or shouted her defiance, now the drums.

With slow steps, Irons crossed the parking lot. What he wanted was immediate egress from the area. What he needed was to evacuate people from the roadhouse. Irons gazed at the Jeep, keys inside. If the caecilians heard the sound, they might turn back.

Five minutes from the construction site, he jogged onto a passable, paved surface. Heading west, he remembered the direction the ranger pointed in. The roadhouse was to the north--he was going the wrong way. The road ran along a high cliff, and Irons slowed at the sight of lights below. By the light of the moon, he could see that this roadway swerved off a long way, and it would probably take hours to follow the switchbacks to Highway 6. He needed a more direct route.

With no path visible, Irons took the slope directly. For the first hundred feet, he could walk in a crouch. However, the gentle grade became a rocky drop. Though not an adept climber, Irons was strong. His fingers and boot toes found crevices as he carefully levered himself down the craggy face.

He did so without fear. Long ago, he had taken the step from outlaw to outsider, living beyond the fringe of human society. None would mourn him should he fall to leave his bones drying on this cliff. Perhaps, around the fire at a big biker run, his name would be whispered, connected with things weird. For living without a tether to the human gestalt left him susceptible to things that only existed in most people's nightmares.

Fingers cramped, knees bruised, he made it to flatter ground. Light shown from below, brighter now. Jeffrey pine and red fir were cast in silhouette on the slope below. Crashing through a meadow clearing, he stumbled on intersecting trails, and chose the descending one. Moving quickly, keeping his footing, he came upon a precipice

with a broad view. In the distance, Owens Valley stood like an ocean of dark. More immediately, several hundred feet below, he saw the highway, which stood empty, save sawhorses with amber warning lights. Finding another trail, he followed the lights, soon he crossing an empty parking lot for the protected wilderness. From there, he ran, sure-footed, to the entrance on Interstate 6. Less than a mile down the road, he found it.

He expected to see a line of semis or a row of bikes, but the roadhouse in question was actually The Roadhouse Lodge, the construction and paint glittering and new in the lights of the parking lot. Hurrying toward the structure, he saw he had arrived too late. Cars lay scattered like children's toys in the hard-packed dirt lot. A huge hole rose into the center of the parking area. Irons was wrong--the things could still burrow.

Even from outside, the drums thundered, screams accompanying. Double-doors leading inside had been wrenched from the frame, shattered on the floor, looking like a gaping mouth. Irons spied a hog in the lot and considered hotwiring it and roaring away. Another scream stopped him. He remembered the ranger, a woman whose name he didn't know, a law official who gave him the benefit of the doubt. Making sure the chain was through his belt loops, for all the good it would do, he entered hell.

Bodies littered the floor, women, children, men, some in serving attire, some in shorts and T-shirts. He knew what had happened. The closure of Highway 1 north caused the Roadhouse's parking lot to be used as a turn-around--and many had chosen to stay, to their misfortune.

The driving beat led him to dance floor and stage area. A band had set up, but the stage was otherwise empty. A DJ had left a tape playing to warm up the crowd. Except the crowd consisted of two blue amphibians striking at speakers hanging from chains.

A voice came from behind him. The caecilians' eye-stalks twitched toward the sound before they returned to their task of rearing at the high speakers. Quietly, Irons entered the dining area. Tables set with white linen and gleaming flatware spread out under dim lighting, wide windows black mirrors.

"Denny, please, please!"

He found her under a table, dressed in a polyester waitress uniform kneeling next to a waiter, his white shirt scarlet with blood. As he crawled under, she opened her mouth to scream. He stopped her with a fast, gentle

hand. "They'll hear you."

Blue eyes wide, she nodded. But then started jabbering. "The dragons came up through the lot, wrecking all the cars, then plowed in the front doors, and eating--" She took a breath. "And Denny tried to pull some people off of the dance floor and he got bit, and, I don't know, are dragons poisonous?"

Irons looked at the waiter. Skin and fabric near his right elbow had been ripped away. It didn't look too bad, but the kid was in shock from the blood loss. Or maybe from the sight of those things.

"Get me a sharp knife..." he read the girl's embroidered nametag, "Darlene, and do it quietly." While she was gone, Irons reached up, grabbing the napkins from the tabletop. As he folded them into pads, she returned. "Good, now cut me a nice long strip from the tablecloth."

In a few moments, Irons had the kid's arm in a pretty good pressure bandage. "Are there others in here?"

Darlene nodded. "Maybe, in the kitchen, hiding, maybe more under the tables, I don't know--"

"Shh." Her voice was rising in panic. "We have to get Denny out. Is there a back door?"

She nodded, eyes wide again. "Through the music area."

As she said it, the pounding thump of the DJ's recorded music came to an abrupt end. Through the wall, the slithering, heavy movements of the caecilians could be heard. They'd soon be on the move. He tried to remember what the ranger had said. Amphibians preferred moist, cool, darkness. They needed to go someplace opposite. "Where's the kitchen?" he whispered.

Lifting Denny in his arms, he followed Darlene across the room. Pushing through double doors produced a billow of smoke. He set the kid on the floor and moved to a bank of six stainless steel stoves. The restaurant staff had fled in the middle of cooking. Several pans still sat on burners. He removed all of them, then turned every burner and every oven up all the way. Immediately, the room grew hot.

Returning to where Denny and Darlene huddled, he whispered, "I don't think they'll come in here, they don't like it--"

Above their heads, a smoke detector screamed. Outside the kitchen, loud crashes shook the Roadhouse. Double doors flew open, the bullet head of a caecilian shoving through. It shook its head, as if in discomfort. Irons could see the sheen of its dark blue skin flattening

to matte. With a hiss, it pulled back out of the room.

Irons scanned the ceiling, finding the smoke detector. Standing on one of the stoves, he pulled it down, yanked the batteries out. Kitchen doors bowled open again, but this time, the monster reared back almost immediately. If he could blast the whole restaurant with hot air, he might chase them back outside.

"Darlene, where's the thermostat for this place?"

She kept her eyes on the swinging doors. "Behind the bar," she whispered.

"Stay here." The bar stood near the entrance. Peering out the circular windows, he moved out of the kitchen.

Distantly, he heard a door thud, and a heavy dragging sound that sped off to investigate. Behind the bar, he located the thermostat, and pegged it. In the bowels of the Roadhouse, a furnace rumbled to life. Wood and glass cracked and crashed, the caecilians seeking source of the sound.

It rarely reached ninety in the mountains. He only had to wait for the monster to flee to the mist-shrouded outdoors, to the comfort of whatever damp wallow they inhabited.

Then, a scream blared out, impossibly loud. Irons realized why he had heard screams outside, above the pounding of the DJ's beat. The fearful sound had been amplified.

As he looked over the bar, a caecilian rushed by, close enough for him to feel the wind of it. Across the dance floor, the leviathans slithered, again leaping for the speakers suspended from the ceiling. He could see a face in a tiny window in the corner--the sound booth. Someone was trapped inside. One of the amphibians moved sideways, caroming into the booth. Again, the ear-piercing scream.

Without thinking, Irons grabbed a bottle, a dry bar rag, and a book of matches. Fashioning a Molotov cocktail, he lit the soaked rag and leapt over the bar. A well-tossed bottle smashed apart on the nearest caecilian's head, coating the thing in flames. It writhed on the floor, hissing in agony as its sensitive skin burned. Before he could go back for a second bottle, an alarm bell rang. Sprinklers let go a rain of rusty water.

He had made the place as damp as it could get.

V.

The flames died on the dragon he'd hit, and both ani-

mals surged around the room, seeking the alarm bell. Water sloshed from the carpet in their wake as they squirmed into the dining area. It at least gave Irons the opportunity to get the survivor out of the DJ booth.

Running, he made his way to the corner and opened the door to the sound room. It was a closet containing a soundboard, light board, racks of electronics. Dual turntables sat on a stage just outside the room.

"Now's your chance," Irons said. "Get out of here, but go quiet."

"Go where? Outside? That's where they came from!" The young man looked a little gray, eyes wide, hands shaking.

"Get to the kitchen. It's too hot for them in there. Wait--" He grabbed the man by the arm. Looking at the gear in the booth, Irons asked, "Is everything live? The stage?"

Looking up from the hand that grabbed him, the DJ said, "Why, you gonna play a song?"

He shook the man. "Is it?"

"Yeah, yeah, let me go!" The DJ pulled away, running across the dance floor.

Irons didn't know much about music. The board in front of him, acres of dials and sliders, was almost meaningless. Instead, he turned to the light board. Everything was labeled with masking or duct tape and black marker. He flipped a few switches, turned a few dimmers. On stage, banks of lights came on. Stage lights were hot, he knew that much. He turned them all on.

With the heat and lights full blast and the sprinklers dripping to a stop, the place became a sauna. Opening the door, Irons heard the alarm go from a bell to loud metallic static before cutting out. No matter. Now, he could lure them back into the stage area, toss as many Molotovs at them as he wanted with the sprinklers empty. Cook the bastards.

As he stepped out, he brushed past a component. His heart nearly stopped as the system roared back to life with the pulsing beat.

Caecilians crashed into the music room through the dining room wall in a blizzard of sheetrock and plaster. He was now trapped as the DJ had been as the amphibians swept through the space, striking at the speakers.

He slammed the door shut. The burned caecilian lunged at the sound, its bullet head ramming the door. Plaster and glass cracked, the equipment rocking in its racks. How sensitive were their tentacle ears?

He gazed at the soundboard. At the bottom a strip of tape labeled the controls. Only the DJ sliders were up. He pegged them.

Feeling the bass thump in his chest, he glanced out the window. The caecilians no longer snapped at the speakers, but slithered away from them. The volume hurt them.

Finding a pair of headphones hanging from a rack, he unplugged them and put them over his ears. Then, with both hands, he pushed every slider, turned every dial, to the maximum.

Even with the headphones, the cacophony cut into his brain. Behind him was a rack of amplifiers. Finding the volume knobs, he cranked everything up. Mics on stage picked up the sound creating a loop. A groaning, howling roar of feedback filled the room, vibrating the walls, the floor, an ungodly hum rattled the cracked glass from the booth's window.

Heads to the floor, the caecilians moved slowly. When they came in contact, they snapped at each other with devastating power. Blood and scales flew from their frenzied attacks.

Irons stepped from the booth, feeling the sound in his bones, on his skin, in his clothing. If he could slip past the battling monsters, he could get back to the bar, burn the place to the ground.

But as the dragons pulled apart, one lunged at him, the contact making it snap at him, rows of teeth audible above the din.

He jerked the chain from his belt loops, swinging it like a flail. Impact drove the lethal bite off target, but just. An urban barbarian with a modern sword, he attacked again and again, smashing at the dragon. But strong as he was, the monsters had shrugged off shotgun blasts. Jaws snapped, inches from his face. Irons' weapon, however, was a more flexible tool than just a blade of steel. He wrapped it around the blunt muzzle, twisting the links. The dragon couldn't open its mouth. It could, however, lift him off the ground. Shaking him, like a terrier with a rat, Irons felt himself battered into a tower holding the lighting truss. Groaning from the blow, the biker held fast.

Pulling himself closer to the smooth dragon, he aimed a kick at the wavering tentacles jutting from its eye socket. It writhed and jerked as he did, slamming him to the ground, swinging him back into the lighting rig. Still he held fast, delivering another kick.

This time, the beast crashed onto the stage, sending

the gear flying. Irons' shoulders and back collided with the ladder tower of the lights. Blackness tried to cloud his vision, but he shook it off. The wounded dragon surged around the room, snared by cables and wires. Out of the corner of his eye, Irons saw the light truss dragged forward, toppling.

Four dozen smoldering lights crashed into the other amphibian. A horrible stench rose as its moist flesh was burned by the smoking fixtures. As it thrashed, pieces of metal and glass flew like shrapnel. A cable snapped, juice surging through the water on the floor. Irons could feel the power electrifying the dragon he rode, its huge muscles twitching in electric agony.

The biker fell with his quarry, splashing and sliding across the dance floor. A breaker must have triggered somewhere, for the lights and the noise ended. But emergency lights kicked on, revealing the dragons twitching in their death throes, electrocuted.

With battered slowness, he lifted his bruised body from the floor. Oddly, the creature had saved Irons' life by thrashing him around the room, ungrounded.

People began to emerge from their hiding places, faces pale and shocked at the sight of the slain dragons. Darlene, the soundman, a shivering Denny, several in cooks' whites, people in suits or hiking clothes, each gathered at the entrance to the music area, unspeaking.

Irons ignored them, the hog in the parking lot foremost on his mind. He needed to steal it before the owner came around. If the biker was alive, he owed Irons; if not, he wouldn't need the hog.

But Irons did. When the authorities arrived, they would have questions the biker couldn't answer. In the parking lot, ransacking the hog's saddlebags. Stripping the red and the green wires with a knife, he crossed them. Irons thought about the electrocuted dragons as he did. With a kick, the Harley roared to life.



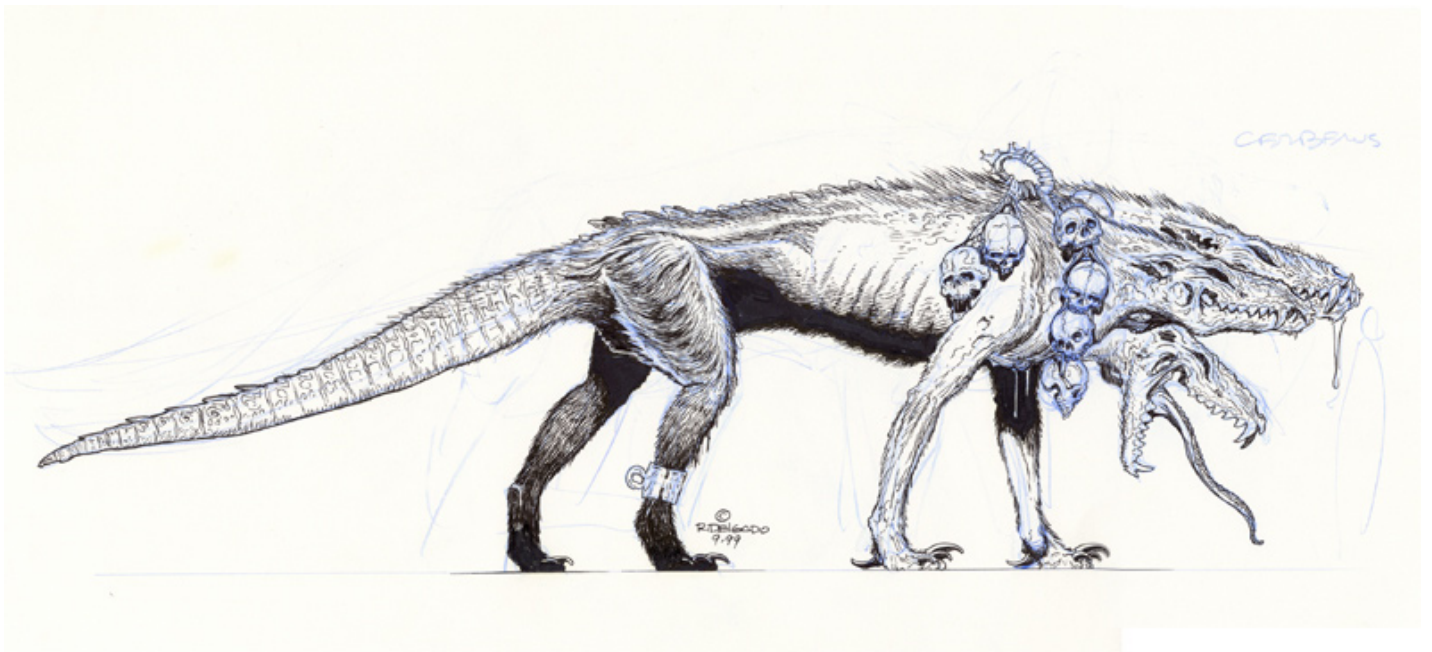
CREATURE FEATURE

by Ricardo Delgado

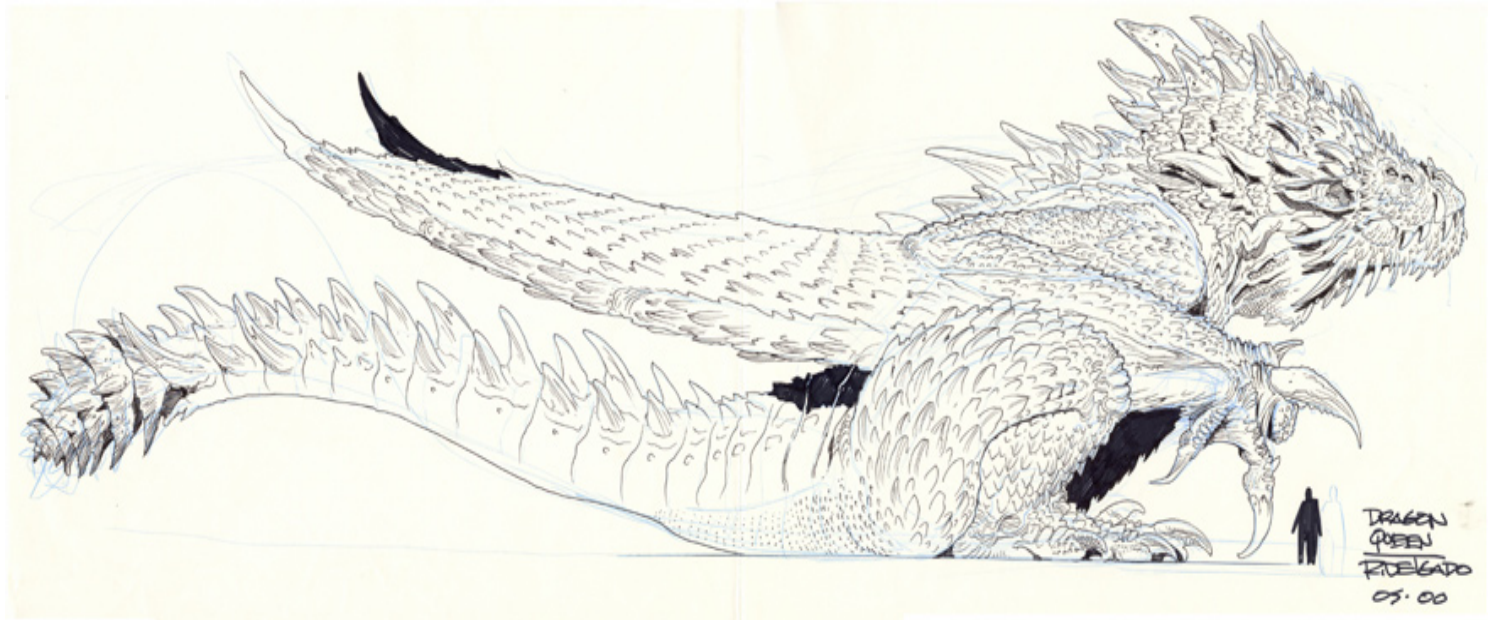
*Ricardo Delgado is a film and comic book artist that has worked on such films as The Incredibles, Men in Black and Apollo 13.

He is the author of the Age of Reptiles comic book series, as well as one of the Production Designers of Disney's Atlantis-The Lost Empire. Delgado is of Costa Rican descent and lives in Los Angeles, California.

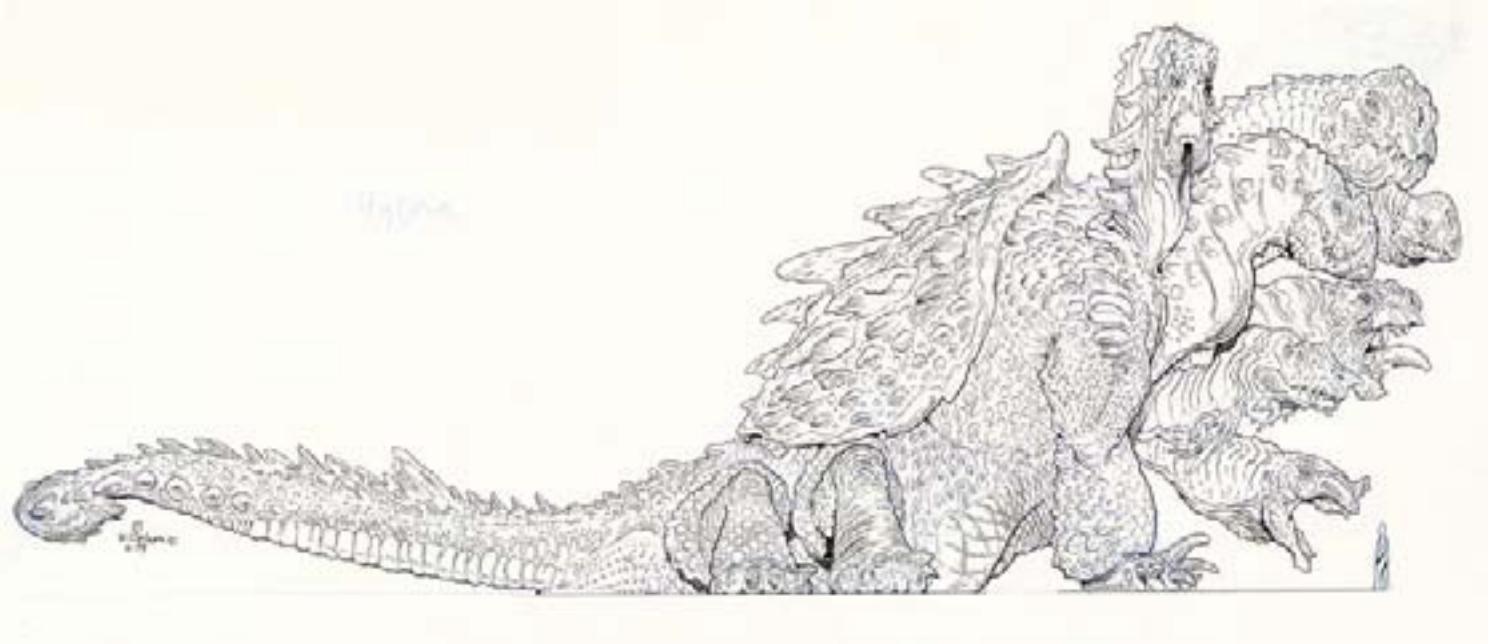
*Wikipedia.org



"Cerberusf"



"Dragon Queen"



"Hydra"

BEAUTIFUL BLUE EYES

by Lawrence Buentello

EVERETT ANDERSON, LIKE SO MANY OTHER PEOPLE in the world, was searching for love.

Of a particular kind.

At Christmas he might find himself decorating a traditional Scotch pine with beautiful glass ornaments, but always alone. On New Year's Eve he might celebrate with old college friends, most of whom were married, though he'd arrive at such festivities invariably stag. And the Fourth of July holiday always seemed to find him sitting by himself in his brother's backyard in Wisconsin watching his nephews tempt fate with illegal fireworks.

In short, Everett seemed incapable of attracting the opposite sex. Or any sex, for that matter. Some people in the world, especially those searching for a particular kind of love, never seemed to achieve their dreams. Some simply failed to perceive relevant social signals—a knowing wink, or a subtle comment on the clever orientation of a gold-plated tie clip. Some people, Everett included, seemed to simply possess the poorest of timing.

But, then again, sometimes a man can get lucky.

This was precisely what Everett Anderson thought when he found the advertisement in the Sunday newspaper's singles column.

Secured deep in the maze of tiny boxes of plaintive requests for meeting the perfect—if not perfectly obscene—mate was the simple message: Beautiful Blue Eyes, #1001, New York.

Everett, an ordinary man with quiet hazel eyes and a decent apartment somewhere in the vicinity of Manhattan, pulled the paper closer to his nose, uncertain if he'd read the entry correctly. The sheets fluttered against his temples as he focused. But it was true—the entry clearly read 'Beautiful Blue Eyes'.

This was a sign to Everett. Since adolescence he'd fantasized about the perfect woman, and his fantasies always centered around a singular quality: no matter how many hair styles, physical measurements and mercurial personalities flowed through his mind, they all seemed to collect around the central fantasy of a pair of gorgeous blue eyes. And not just any shade of blue, but the crystal clear blue of white light through a perfect diamond, or the bluest water on a haunted sea, or the untainted blue of a perfect

summer sky.

Everett preferred not to think of this as a perversion.

But when a man feels the need for love—of a particular kind—and he's lived to his thirty-first year without having had a single memorable relationship, sometimes the smallest sign seems profoundly significant.

Which is why he immediately rose from his chair and hurried to the kitchen, his eyes still focused on the tiny box, to find a pair of scissors. This foray was as much of a risk as he'd taken since playing competitive chess in college, and it was a minor miracle he made it to the kitchen without suffering serious injury.

He clipped the ad, with plenty of border space, wiped the perspiration from his ever-widening forehead (and didn't he really want to find love before going completely bald), and taped it to the refrigerator. Then he opened the laptop computer sitting on the kitchen table and tremblingly sacrificed a major credit card number to join the agency sponsoring the advertisements.

When his credit card cleared and he received a welcoming email to "Special Loves, Inc.," he sat for a moment in quiet thought before composing the following message—

* * *

Dear Blue Eyes:

After reading your ad I realized that it must be more than coincidence that has caused us to cross paths in this life. I suppose it's premature to tell you of my dreams and desires, but I do feel the need to describe the supernatural intuition I feel that you and I are meant to meet. Please respond. I promise you won't be sorry. I'm enclosing my email address, my home address and telephone number. If I'm not being too forward, I think our meeting was predestined.

Your future love, Everett Anderson.

* * *

Everett, being no Lord Byron, thought this sentiment full of romance and poetry. And who could possibly re-

sist a man of letters?

He sent the message to the address provided by the agency and checked his email twenty times a day for a response. He made insensitive inquiries of the mail carrier. He foraged through the messages on his answering machine for an encouraging reply.

A week later, he was still foraging.

Two weeks passed, then a month. Everett thought about making queries to the agency, but eventually his ardor cooled, and he came to realize that some people, no matter how poetically inclined, were just meant to be alone.

* * *

The morning after this epiphany, however, Everett woke from the strangest dream of his life. He'd been swimming in a sea of crystal clear water, a drifting man-fish pursued by an ethereal vision of shimmering blue eyes circling him like a determined predator, or, perhaps, a watchful companion.

Now, this sort of subconscious symbolism was not lost on Everett. As he sat with his arms around his comforter-crowned knees he was absolutely certain these were the same blue eyes of his life-long fantasy. His dreaming mind was, apparently, not yet ready to surrender his youthful hopes and dreams.

But it seemed his conscious mind was not so hopeful, so as he threw cold water on his face in the bathroom he also threw a little figurative water on his dreams. Dreams were only dreams, he told himself, and were more than capable of raising false hopes.

By the time Everett arrived at his office building he'd already forgotten the dream. He greeted his fellow travel agents at eight-ten, sat at his desk to review the day's latest email at eight-fifteen, and by eight-thirty thought he was going insane.

There, overshadowing the spreadsheets and news reports, a pair of ghostly eyes floated on the computer screen.

Everett blinked, leaned forward (certainly this was an optical illusion caused by poor fluorescent lighting) and adjusted the contrast. But the blue eyes lingered in the nether sphere of cyberspace. He cut the power to the monitor and the eyes disappeared. He turned the power back on and the eyes reappeared (faintly, like his own reflection) amidst the software.

His initial reaction to this phenomenon was to realize that he was drooling because he'd left his mouth agape for too long. But then he thought to find a witness more reliable than his own affected psyche, so he stumbled to the cubicle nearest to his and said, with a straight face, "Bev, I've got a pair of eyes stuck in my computer. Would you take a look?"

Beverly Davis, a fortyish blonde with fair features and a coquettish smile—Everett considered this a well-practiced expression, no doubt rehearsed before a mirror for hours at time—laughed coquettishly and touched Everett's arm.

"What did you want to show me, Everett?" she asked.

"The eyes in my computer. Hurry, before the screen saver comes on."

So Bev, encouraged by Everett's hand under her arm, stumbled to his desk wearing the kind of smirk reserved for bad jokes. She leaned over the desk and studied the screen. Her smirk vanished. She squinted, evidently mystified.

"What are you talking about? I don't see anything."

Everett cautiously approached the screen. Bev's chin touched his shoulder. The drifting blue eyes were gone. He turned his head at various angles, but the phenomenon was not repeated. All he saw were spreadsheet entries for overpriced trips to the Azores. And then the screen saver erupted onto the screen. Drifting balloons. Strangely, none of them were blue.

Bev pulled her chin from his shoulder.

"Everett, you just called me over here to flirt."

Everett stared at Bev, speechless. Her perfume was beginning to make his eyes water.

"No, I swear—"

"No need to explain. I understand how men are. Always trying to find a subtle way to get a girl's attention."

She smiled, squeezed his shoulder and walked a little too slowly back to her cubicle.

Everett sat staring at computer-generated balloons. He was sorry Bev had gotten the wrong impression—that she might return his unintentional flirtations meant nothing to him since her eyes were an ordinary brown in color, but this didn't quite register as strongly in his mind as the fact that he must be going completely insane.

He sat at his desk for the rest of the day contemplating the apparition. Clearly, his most recent rejection had traumatized him in ways he wasn't qualified to interpret. Was his obsession causing him to hallucinate? Was he so

desperately lonely?

Everett ultimately failed to find any answers to these questions as he sat half-heartedly searching for the best price on travel packages to Buenos Aires and opening Bev's suggestive emails: What do you want to show me now? He really wasn't prepared to go insane. He hoped the symptoms would eventually fade, like a rash.

* * *

But the visions didn't fade; in fact, they seemed to intensify.

On the subway ride home Everett noticed odd reflections in the window of the car. These reflections might have been an oversized pair of eyes, but he buried his face in the Times before confirming his suspicion.

He stepped in a pool of water as he left the subway car. As he stared down at his shoes in dismay—moderately priced, and evidently not entirely weather-proof—he saw the billowing image of two eyes (with lovely crystal blue irises and penetrating onyx pupils) staring up at him from the puddle. Startled, he dropped his newspaper across the visage and hurried along.

Once inside his apartment he bolted and chained the door, disconnected the telephone and huddled in bed with his knees pressed against his five o'clock shadow.

As the evening passed, Everett tried to comprehend the meaning of the visions. Could a man suffer psychological consequences if he remained alone too long? And if he became fixated on a particular kind of love was there an eventual psychic price to pay for his obsession?

He knew that what he really needed was the right woman to love—a woman with all the right qualities—and to be the only man privileged to have her love. If he could only stare into her perfect blue eyes every night secure in the knowledge that he was the sole recipient of their affection—

Everett covered his face with a pillow. Not only was he going crazy, but he was harboring desires for a love-slave. His prognosis was not getting any better.

So he called his brother in Wisconsin to unload his burden, and his brother told him to start a stamp collection. So he surfed the net to find the names of a few promising psychologists, but stopped when he realized he would be too embarrassed to make an appointment. So he paced the limited floor space of his kitchen as he tried to avoid eye contact with reflective surfaces. Then

he realized that the singles ad was still taped to the refrigerator door.

He stood in bare feet studying the ad (the extra border was indeed a considerate touch) as he tried to divine the reason why it might have triggered the spilling of so much psychological dunnage. But the words were so simple, so pure, so delightfully expressive that he fell in love all over again.

Everett shrugged at his own gullibility. Exquisite as they seemed, he could either surrender to his delusions or fight to suppress them.

But suppressing delusions seemed to be beyond his sphere of influence.

That night his dreams returned, and this time they were accompanied by a soundtrack.

Everett, why are you ignoring me? the eyes seemed to whisper through a billowing unconscious sea. Or, at least, he thought they were whispering. The eyes circled him in a great ocean, drifting through undulating tendrils of seaweed. I thought you loved me, I thought we were destined to be together.

Everett's dream-persona sputtered unintelligible bubbles.

Everett's real-life persona rolled out of bed and bounced his forehead off the carpet.

When he was able to recognize his surroundings he stumbled to the kitchen, stripped the singles ad from his refrigerator and stuffed it down the garbage disposal. It was only a symbolic act, but it was the only action he could think to take to counteract the morbid feelings left by the dream.

* * *

The next day at the office, however, he thought of another way.

Everett asked Bev Davis out to dinner.

She seemed to accept his invitation as an inevitable event. Her smugness was nearly impossible to endure, but endure he did, showering her with imaginative compliments and painful conversation. It really wasn't fair of him to use her as a psychological distraction, but Everett was desperate.

They went to Henri's On the River and sat at a fairly decent table with candlelight and aperitifs. A huge aquarium festooned with tropical fish stood near the hostess's counter, which troubled Everett a bit, but he managed

to smile as he handed the woman his coat. The only eyes that watched him from the aquarium belonged to a wayward angelfish.

"Everett, I never thought you'd find the courage to ask me out," Bev said as she dropped her linen napkin onto her thighs.

"I decided to risk rejection," he said with a grin. "But what fun is life without taking a few chances?"

He could see, in an objective way, that she was an attractive woman with a good deal of sensual allure—but her eyes were dark, unresponsive, impassable. It was as if he was staring into a body without depth, without a soul. He felt no arousal for her, no desire.

Still, he hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary since picking her up in a cab outside her apartment building. He was beginning to think Bev was just the right therapy.

"You're such a peculiar man," she said as she probed her lobster. "But I find strangeness attractive. You know, oddness. Someone who seems connected to something beyond the ordinary."

Everett bit his lip and nodded.

"Amour is something beyond the material world. The language of love is ethereal. You wouldn't believe what speaking in tongues does for me."

"Tongues," he said, sipping his martini.

"Love is something that needs to be experienced through other senses. Love and sex."

"Sex," he murmured.

His fork was poised to spear the lightly baked flesh of his flounder when he suddenly realized that the olive in his martini had become a perfect blue eye—a blue eye that was staring at him accusingly.

Everett, how could you cheat on me with another woman?

Everett dropped his fork and began choking.

An old gent grabbed him from behind and began administering the Heimlich maneuver.

"Everett, what's wrong?" Bev asked imploringly, though her consumption of lobster wasn't significantly compromised.

Everett managed to fight off his elderly savior and stared at the martini glass. The olive had reappeared.

"I'm sorry, Bev," he said abruptly, "I have to go."

"Why? Is it me? You don't like me, after all? We haven't even had sex yet. Who's going to pay?"

Everett dropped a credit card on the tablecloth and

hurried to the door. As he pulled his coat from the hostess's hands he caught a glimpse of the aquarium—the angelfish's eyes were now terribly large and human. And blue.

She's not right for you, Everett. I'm the one you dream about.

Everett dropped his coat and fled.

* * *

Later that evening the doorbell rang.

Everett answered the entreaty with a bottle of Wild Turkey cradled against his chest.

The deliveryman handed him the envelope without changing expressions. When he extended his hand for a tip, Everett handed him the bottle.

At first he thought it was a certified letter announcing a civil suit filed by his angry co-worker for psychological damage suffered on their date. His credit card had, unfortunately, expired the previous month.

But once he opened the envelope and read the letter his heart began to pound like a drunken jazz drummer.

* * *

Everett:

Your letter was inspiring, and I share your intuition about our future. I hope our meeting will be the beginning of a lifetime of love and caring. I'll be visiting your apartment tomorrow about eight o'clock. I hope your arms will be open and waiting for my love.

Your future recipient of affection, Beautiful Blue Eyes.

* * *

Everett couldn't find a name on the paper, only the familiar #1001, New York of the advertisement.

He stared at the letter a moment, trying to settle his thoughts. He tried envisioning the face of the woman who'd sent it, her hair color, weight, potential blemishes, the timbre of her voice—but all he could really see were her eyes. Beautiful blue eyes, swimming in the Sargasso Sea of his dreams.

He felt some pity for the woman, though. Tomorrow she would arrive to find a lunatic obsessed with visions. How long would it take for her to perceive his unraveling

perceptions and flee the building?

Everett lay down on his sofa. Perhaps his thinking was too defeatist. Perhaps this woman (beautiful, beautiful, beautiful blue eyes) would be the one to wake him from his obsession and set him on the right path. The right path being, of course, sanity.

Which meant that he only had a little time to run his best sport coat to the cleaners, vacuum the apartment and get an emergency teeth-whitening.

And, strangely, once he was preoccupied with these preparations, he found himself free of visions. He hurried to the elevator (slowed a bit by too much Wild Turkey), dragging his sport coat across the hallway by the sleeve.

* * *

Sitting in his living room, remaining motionless to prevent his trousers from wrinkling, Everett felt a delightful calm fill his mind. It was nearly eight o'clock. The room was immaculate, the dishes washed, the bathroom sanitized, and his bad breath neutralized by masticated sprigs of mint. The apartment's atmosphere was as near to religious purity as he could imagine.

He'd seen no visions, heard no voices since receiving the letter. And he'd slept dreamlessly the previous night. He felt so good about his circumstances that he let the last few days spiral away from his consciousness as if nothing unusual had happened at all. A box of chocolates lay strategically positioned on the coffee table, and a magnum of champagne stood chilling in a bowl of ice in the kitchen. The telephone directory lay by the telephone, opened to the best restaurants in the city. Well, the best restaurants that delivered, anyway.

The doorbell rang.

Everett nearly hurdled the coffee table getting to the door. He peered through the peephole hopefully, but was disappointed to see a scruffy teenager wearing a baseball cap peering back at him.

"Who is it?" Everett said.

"Runners Express. I got a delivery."

He tried to remember if, in his delirium, he might have ordered some Mandarin chicken from The Wokkery (his favorite), but decided he hadn't.

"I didn't order anything."

"I got a package for Everett Anderson. Are you Everett Anderson?"

"Yes."

"Then I got a delivery for you."

"All right, but hurry up, I'm expecting company."

Everett opened the door, signed the teenager's manifest and accepted the package. It was now past eight o'clock and he knew she would be stepping off the elevator any minute. He looked around the apartment for a place to hide the box and settled on the closet. But before he opened the closet door to drop the delivery onto his neatly aligned shoes he noticed the return address on the package: #1001, New York.

Curious, he began unwrapping the brown paper enclosing the box, wondering if his future love had sent him a gift. Cigars, perhaps? A nice set of candles? When he finished pulling off the paper he found he was holding a small aluminum cube adorned with an odd array of dials and clasps. The words Caution—Fragile were stenciled on the cube's shining material.

Everett knew then that a woman would not be stepping off the elevator. He realized, most intuitively, that there would be no woman at all.

Strangely, though, as he stood in his immaculate living room holding the cool aluminum container, he felt no anxiety, only a quiet sense of anticipation. So when he opened the carefully sealed lid the experience wasn't nearly as unnerving for him as, say, someone without Everett's particular perspective on beauty.

Hello, Everett.

Actually, it was love at first sight.



TURKEY DAY

by Florence Ann Marlowe

THE MEN STOPPED TO STARE AT TYRONE WILSON as he ambled up to the work site. Hammers froze in mid-swing and saws ceased gnawing, teeth still biting into the yellowed pine slabs. Tyrone could feel the half dozen pairs of eyes as they rested on his lumbering bulk of a body.

He had removed his tie and jacket and slung them over one shoulder. The walk up the ridge from where his car had died had been long and rocky. The frosty November air chilled the huge sweat stain that spread across his back. An empty gas can swung by his side with each labored step.

"Hi, there," he said. "My car just pooped out on me a mile or so down the mountain. I saw chimney smoke and just took a chance there was someone up here."

He knew he was being optimistic calling this little hovel a town. What he saw as he broke through the bramble blocking the path up the mountain was a group of trailer homes and make-shift shanties. Not a decent house among them. Tyrone counted all of maybe thirty-six such dwellings, tightly circled to form some kind of village nestled among the rocks. There were no paved sidewalks or streets. It looked like a comical little ghost town. The only people he had spotted was this band of carpenters erecting another shed someone would call home. Tyrone wondered if this is what his grandfather used to refer to as a "shanty town."

"Where'd you say you left your car?" one of the men asked him.

The sound of the man's voice surprised Tyrone. He had expected some kind of hillbilly lingo from this weathered-looking man in faded overalls and sleeveless undershirt.

"I left it down by the trail," Tyrone said.

Another man, wearing a shapeless hat and a pair of jeans tied at the waist with baling twine, jumped off of a ladder and stepped in front of the first man.

"Can't get it started?"

Tyrone shook his head. "I think I need a jump."

The first man slowly turned to the gentleman in the hat and stared down his nose at him.

"I was talking to him, Martin. Can't you see me talking here?"

Martin pulled his hat off and whacked it against his thigh. A cloud of sawdust boiled in the air. "No law says I can't help the man out, Ray."

Tyrone shifted his weight from one foot to the next. A sharp pain had roosted in the small of his back half way up the trail and was clawing its way to downright agony.

"Excuse me," he interrupted the two quarreling men. "I just need to get to a phone. I'm trying to make it home for the Holiday weekend and I've got a long way to go." He attempted what he hoped would come across as a good natured grin. "Don't wanna be late for Turkey day, y'know."

"No problem," Martin said. He started towards Tyrone, but the man he had called Ray placed a hand on his chest and brought him to a halt.

"I said I was talking to him." His voice had a dangerous edge to it.

A few of the other men had stepped closer. They muttered quietly to one another. Tyrone's eyes flashed from the argument to the dirty faces who were forming a circle around him.

A pale, used-looking woman had stepped out of one of the trailer homes. She drew closer, nearly bumping into Tyrone. For a second their eyes met. She looked away, catching the glance of one of the silent men standing nearby.

"Jim, why don't you offer to help the man?" Her tone was insistent, almost chiding.

Tyrone turned to look at Jim, a thin young man whose face had been reddened by the sun. Jim took a peek at the first two men who were still arguing and shook his head. The pale woman glared back at him, her lips drawn together tightly.

The violent sound of an engine startled the group. An ancient Ford pick-up came rumbling down the road, churning up gravel in its wake. The red paint job had faded to a dead pink and its wheels wobbled, but it steadily chugged along up along side Tyrone, parting the little gathering. An older man with a peppered gray mustache poked his head out the driver's side window.

"You need a lift, young man?" He grinned, revealing widely spaced teeth.

"Hold it right there, Albert! I was just talking to this fellah." Ray strode up to the pick-up, his hands balled into fists. "You've got no right to just butt in like that."

"He's got the only working vehicle in town," Martin said. His lips pulled back from his teeth in disgust. "He thinks he has the right to take over when ever he sees fit."

"Oh, shut up, you two!" the older man said amiably. "Can't you see this boy's in need of a hand?" He grinned at Tyrone and pulled his door open. "Go on and hop in, young man. The door's open on the other side."

The woman pushed her way past all the men and stood directly in front of Tyrone. Her eyes were fierce as she faced the driver of the truck.

"We've got children, Albert Reins!" Her voice was an angry bark.

The man in the truck continued smiling. "So do I, Jenny. I got three of 'em."

"But they're all grown!"

Tyrone was suddenly uncomfortable. He had a feeling he was in the middle of some kind of feud. The thought that came to his mind was that city folks get killed in family feuds.

"Maybe I should just find a phone," Tyrone said, looking around the tiny town. He heard a metallic click that cut through the air like a fresh blade. He felt a change in the atmosphere. Looking at the group around him, he could see that they all felt it.

The woman backed away, nudging Tyrone as she retreated to her trailer. Her eyes looked misty as they seemed to pass over him, reluctantly.

"Come on, young man. Let's get you taken care of," Albert said cheerfully.

Tyrone trotted as quickly as he could to the passenger's side. The door swung open with a creaky squeal. He hefted his body into the front seat.

The group of men had begun to break up. A few of them started picking up tools again. Some were shaking their heads, glaring at the pick-up. Only Martin stood his ground facing the driver of the old truck.

"Come on, Martin. Where's your holiday spirit?"

The driver chuckled, pulling his door shut. His eyes remained fixed on the angry figure in front of him.

Without warning Albert pulled the truck back, its wheels spinning in the dirt. He backed the truck up in a straight line until he was well clear of the carpenters. Tyrone looked out his window and met the gaze of the tired

woman the older man had called Jenny. She stared back at him unhappily. Tyrone then heard that same metallic click, only closer, more intimate.

The pick-up swung back in an arch and made the first maneuver of a "K" turn. Putting it in forward gear the driver rolled the vehicle down the dirt road, leaving the others in his dust.

A voice howled from behind them, "We all have families, Albert! You sonovabitch!"

"Happy Turkey Day to you, too!" Albert shouted back. In a lower voice, he added, "asshole."

Tyrone turned slowly to meet his new companion's eyes. A wide grin spread beneath the peppered mustache.

"Scared ya, huh? I bet they scared you bad."

"A little," Tyrone answered. "What was that all about? If you don't mind my asking..."

Albert shrugged. "Nothing. Just a bunch of numb-nuts that have nothing better to do. Don't even worry about it."

The truck rumbled down unpaved road, jostling Tyrone's body like a mound of gelatin. They rolled down a hill towards a fenced-in mud lot. A slanted shelter barely stood next to the lot. Tyrone figured it was a barn. Sure enough, a lone cow, slab-sided and aged, stood worrying at a pile of hay in front of the dilapidated structure. The animal was ankle deep in mud and the odor of manure and ammonia ripped at Tyrone's nostrils.

"My Sunny spotted you coming down the foot path," the older man said, winking.

"Sunny?" Tyrone glanced at the emaciated cow.

"My daughter. She spotted you almost a half hour ago. Figured you were lost."

"Yeah, well I'm that, too. My car is dead and I think I'm going to need a jump. I've got Triple A, though. Kind of tough with Thanksgiving and all."

The driver was silent.

"Y'know, holiday weekends and everything. Hard to get a tow truck." Tyrone finally gave up and leaned back in his seat.

The truck pulled up in front of a house that looked like it had sprouted little sheds and over hangs the way a rock sprouts toadstools. The front of the house was obviously the oldest, its paint peeled and splintered. Plywood had been used to add on another section to its side. Another room had been hammered onto the front, crowding a tiny cockeyed window. Tyrone thought the add-on

had two doors until he realized that one door, void of a doorknob, had been hammered in place as part of a wall. The empty socket where the knob should have been was a blank eye filled with newspaper.

The front door opened and a knobby woman in a flimsy house dress stepped out. A cloud of squirrely brown hair covered her head like a cap. The wind playfully caught at it as she ran down the walk. Her hands were meshed together anxiously as she peered into the cab of the pick-up. Tyrone hauled himself out and the woman gasped, covering her mouth with both hands.

"Whattya think, Kay? This poor boy was being squabbled over by that sneak, Marty Hammond." Albert stepped out of the truck and pulled something long and metal out with him.

Tyrone leaned against the pick-up's hood and gaped. He had never seen a shotgun up close before. There was something predatory about the weapon, its long snake-like snout and the way Albert gripped it in his hand. Tyrone could hear that metallic click and remembered how the crowd had backed off.

Kay was trying not to giggle. Tyrone wondered if she saw much company in her crumbly little house. Her bird-like eyes were clenched with glee as she watched Albert and Tyrone walk towards the front door.

"I'll bet he was pissed," she said. She minced back into the house and bustled ahead of them.

The interior was even shabbier looking. Tyrone could feel the unevenness of the warped wooden floors. The walls had been painted many times and now the paint was whittled away in thin spirals along the plasterboard. A musty smell fouled the air. The furniture was sparse, thread bare and piss-poor. A coffee can, brittle with rust, upheld one end of the lumpy looking sofa. Milk crates stood beneath cracked lamps. The entire room wept with poverty.

"Sunny!" Kay was calling as she hurried into the next room. "Sunny! That young man you saw on the path is here! Daddy got him!"

"Where's the boys, Kay?" Albert had casually dropped his shotgun onto the sofa and was shrugging off his jacket.

Tyrone glanced around the room. He could see exposed electrical wires, so he assumed there was electricity.

"Could I use your phone?" he asked Albert.

The man jerked his head around and grinned. A

chuckle worked its way up from his throat.

"We don't have a phone, uh...what's the name?"

"Tyrone. Tyrone Wilson."

Albert nodded. "Tyrone, there's only a few phones up this way. Couple of people hooked into the phone company back a few years, but not all of us can afford such a luxury."

Tyrone felt his heart sink.

"Ray Buchs has a phone. His son works down at the chemical plant. He and his wife go into town once a while and buy groceries."

"Ray? Was that the guy who was..."

Albert nodded again. "Yep. That was him. The asshole."

Tyrone looked out the front door. Where there may have been a screen once was walled over with what looked like wax paper. It made the view seem cloudy. The layers of dry, waxy sheets reminded Tyrone of a wasp's nest.

Two young men shuffled noisily into the room. Both were tall and slender. The dark haired boy had rolled the sleeves of his faded plaid shirt to expose gnarled, muscled arms. His skin was tan, leathery. The lighter haired boy looked wiry. Both young men were hard muscle wrapped around bony frames, the products of physical labor. They grinned, a jumble of odd fitting teeth crowding their mouths.

"Jonathan, Markie...this is that young man Sunny was talking about." Albert moved out of the way so his sons could venture closer to the guest.

Tyrone nodded, uncomfortably. The boys were circling, their bodies close to him, smelling earthy.

"Where's your car?" the blonde one asked.

"I left it down at the footpath," Tyrone answered, glancing at Albert.

Albert nodded. He motioned with one hand, whisking his thumb in the general direction of outdoors. "Go take care of that, okay, Markie?"

Markie, the blonde, nodded and jogged out the door. His brother ran after him, whooping loudly as they escaped the rank little house. A chill rushed into the room in their wake. Tyrone was about to ask how Markie was going to take care of his car, when he turned to see the young girl Kay had ushered into the room.

She was a gangly, thin girl, straight up and down. She looked all of maybe seventeen. Her face was long and narrow. Her lips were so full they were shapeless, just slabs of rosy flesh bent into a bow. She had big eyes, pal-

est blue and her hair was wispy, the color of sand. She wasn't pretty by any means, but she had a childlike sensuality about her. She stared at Tyrone, her small breasts heaving slightly.

"This is our Sunny," Albert said. He beamed at the lanky girl. "She couldn't wait to meet you."

Sunny seemed to jet forward a bit, but her mother caught her by the shoulder, restraining gently.

Tyrone's eyes slid to the shotgun lying harmlessly on the sofa. His very thoughts were, uh-oh.

Sunny grinned as she stood with her hands behind her. Tyrone could see the outline of her pelvis pushing against the thin material of her short dress. A spring of arousal uncoiled inside Tyrone's loins.

"Sunny was so excited when she saw you," Kay said, patting the girl's narrow shoulder. "She ran out to the barn to get her Daddy."

Albert took Tyrone's elbow and guided him past the two women. Tyrone got a whiff of vanilla and musk as he brushed against Sunny.

"I thought you two could get to know each other in here, while Markie takes care of your car, Tyrone."

Albert pushed at a rickety door and led Tyrone into a shabby little bedroom. Tyrone turned and looked into the older man's face. Albert laughed, slapping Tyrone on the back.

"Well, we don't have a sitting room, young man."

Sunny slid past her father, nearly bouncing off of Tyrone's chest. Her breath smelled thickl of toothpaste.

"We'll both be out by the barn. Waiting for Markie to get back."

Before Tyrone could protest, Albert slipped out of the room. As Sunny's parents closed the door behind them, Tyrone could see their two smiling faces in the waning crack of the doorway.

Her hands were suddenly flat against his chest, her face close to his.

"God, I can't believe I've finally got you!" she said, a burr of excitement rippling along her words.

"Got me?" Tyrone backed away slightly. Sunny pushed forward, her hips thrusting against his belly.

"Don't you want to fuck me?"

She slid her palms over his chest and stomach, stirring warm patches on his skin. Her fingers crept between the buttons on his shirt and plucked them apart.

She squealed, pinching a thickness of fat at his waist. "Ooo, I love it!"

Sunny dropped to her knees, tearing at his belt. Tyrone stared down at her tawny head. He was stunned by her frank lust. Warning alarms rang between his ears, but movement in his crotch urged him to wait a while, see where she would take him. She pulled his zipper down and her hands disappeared inside his pants like a pair of burrowing animals. Tyrone's eyes closed as he felt her mouth, those thick lips, moving over his stomach. Her tongue flicked beneath the curve of his overflowing belly and lapped at his pubic hairs. His knees quivered and he grabbed at her hair with one hand.

Her mouth found his penis and he could feel her swallow it. That silly smirk that takes over one's mouth during sexual pleasure sneaked across Tyrone's face. He moaned audibly and Sunny sucked harder, the soft inside of her mouth squeezing his cock eagerly.

She began to creep backwards across the floor, her lips still wrapped around his penis, urging him to follow. Tyrone's legs sluggishly propelled him forward to the sorry-looking bed. She pulled her mouth free, making a loud, wet popping sound. Tyrone gasped.

Sunny grabbed his shirt and stripped it from his body. Her mouth adhered to his belly like a suction cup. She moved her head back and forth, her teeth nibbling at his skin, causing little shock waves of pleasure rolling over Tyrone's nervous system. A numbing weightiness drifted down his legs and dropped into his heels. His head felt like a balloon.

Sunny slid Tyrone's pants down to his knees. She pushed them around his ankles with her bare feet. Her hands kneaded his meaty ass, her fingers digging into the flesh. He grunted, a prickle of pain interrupting his ecstasy. She pulled him onto the bed and the wooden box beneath the thin mattress protested.

"Wait." Tyrone struggled to get the words out. "I don't have protection."

Sunny's face was pale and waxy. She pushed him down, his head landing at the foot of the bed. Her hands became lost in his flesh, massaging, kneading. Her eyes were bright with desire. She wound her skirt up to her waist, exposing a long, lean torso that was fishbelly white.

Sunny straddled him. Her hand searched for his stiff penis. He could feel the work hewn calluses on her fingers as she caught him in her hand. She worked it between her legs, pointing it in the right direction. Tyrone felt a surge of painful delight as the head touched her hot pussy. A squirt of semen escaped between her fingers and

she grinned down at him. She fell forward against his belly, the weight of her pressing his groin.

"Oh, God, this is so good," Sunny moaned. Her voice had gone husky. She grabbed his breasts, pinching the nipples. "Ooo, God, I love it!"

Tyrone's head was clouded with his oncoming orgasm. He gripped the ragged bedcovers. His toes began to splay. Sunny was rocking back and forth, her flesh slapping against his. Her head was thrown back, her neck glistening with sweat.

Heat rushed down Tyrone's thighs making him weak. His vision had softened and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Sunny's body rolled at the hips, her head lolling.

"Oh! Oh, oh, oh!" she wailed, as the motion of her pelvis sped up.

Her grip on his breasts tightened and Tyrone clenched his teeth as he felt his wad blow. The explosion in his loins left him weak and momentarily sightless.

"Oh, oh," Sunny cried. "Oh, Maaaa! I'm dooonne!"

The bedroom door flew open and Albert, Kay and the dark haired Jonathan swept into the room. Tyrone was unsure of what had happened. Sunny's body slumped forward. She slid her arms around his big body and kissed his moist skin as Albert and Jonathan wound coils of chain around his wrists and ankles, binding him to the bed. They latched the chains to the metal headboard and footboard, securing them with padlocks.

Tyrone's eyes wildly flicked from one side of the bed to the other. His tongue was thick in his mouth. The weight of the spent woman lying on top of him and the sudden lethargy that washed over his every limb prevented him from struggling to his feet.

"All right, Sunny," Albert said. "Move."

Sunny sighed, her cheek resting on Tyrone's stomach.

"He's so soft, Daddy."

"All right, that's enough."

The man gently took the girl's arm and pulled her off. Tyrone felt his penis slip out of her.

"What's this," he managed to say.

Kay was beaming at him. She brushed his sweaty hair from his forehead as she sat on the bed next to him.

"He is beautiful!" she said.

Tyrone's teeth began to chatter. He could feel his insides coiling up, winding.

"Please," he began to stammer. "Could -- could you please let me dress?"

Albert grinned down at him. The man's work hardened hand came down on Tyrone's belly, once, twice, patting. Tyrone's eyes widened, his jaw stuck, trembling. His voice was lost as the old man smiled kindly at him.

"Easy, big fellah. You're fine the way you are."

The other boy, Markie, ran into the room. He skidded to a stop on one foot, nearly colliding into his father. He turned to look at Tyrone strapped to the bed.

"You got him?" he asked breathlessly.

"What's it look like, asswipe?" his brother jeered at him.

"Hey!" Albert shouted. The two boys turned sharply. "Your mother and sister are in the room! I won't have that kind of language around here!"

Sullenly the boys averted their eyes. Together they muttered a jumbled apology.

Tyrone felt a mad urge to black out. The figures around him seemed to move too quickly, the words spoken to fast. He tried to slow it down, focus in first on one then another. He spotted Sunny propped against the wall facing the bed. She smiled at Tyrone as he darted looks at Albert, the boys and then her. Like a dreary little fairy she danced across the floor, plopping down at the foot of the bed. She slid her hands between Tyrone's legs to fondle his buttocks.

"You happy with him, Ma?" she purred.

Kay was gathering up Tyrone's clothing. She glanced up at her daughter.

"Oh, he's really nice, Sunshine."

Albert bent down by the bed and came back up with one of Tyrone's shoes. Tyrone stared at it, his mind racing to identify it. Albert tossed it to Jonathan who handed it to his mother.

"Yep, he should last us right through to Christmas!"

Tyrone's brain iced over. His tongue loosened and his voice bolted free.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he roared.

Albert's head spun in his direction. "Hey!" he shouted.

Tyrone tried to pull himself up, his face reddening. "Let me outta here, right now!"

Kay's face furrowed with worry. "Oh, Jonathan, don't let him yell like that! Sounds carry! They'll hear him in town."

Jonathan nodded and left the room. Tyrone began to pitch and rock, the bed beneath him squeaking. His chains rattled as he fought. He realized he wasn't going

anywhere, but his voice did carry. He would scare them into unchaining him.

"I'm warning you people! Let me outta here! You've got no right to hold me like this!"

Jonathan reappeared in the doorway with a tennis ball. He took long strides to the bed and pushed the ball into Tyrone's mouth. Tyrone sucked in a deep mouthful of air, tasting the fuzzy felt.

Sunny stroked his thighs with one hand. "Poor baby." She turned to her father. "What was his name, Daddy?"

Albert shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Okay, we got work to do." He glanced over his shoulder at Markie who was picking at a scab on his elbow. "You take care of that car?"

The boy glanced up. "Yeah. Jon's gotta help me take it apart later."

"Where'd you hide it?"

"Pushed into the bushes. It's real old."

"Okay." Albert clapped his big hands together. "I'll get the barn all ready." He gestured to Kay with his chin. "You do whatever you have to in here." Before leaving the room, he gave his wife a peck on the cheek.

Tyrone began to pant. That icy darkness threatened to close up his mind, put him to sleep until the nightmare was over. The ball made his mouth dry and hot, wrenching back to reality. Tears trickled down his cheeks and Sunny scooted closer to him. With her finger she traced the trail of each tear. Her face was a long, sad portrait.

"Sunshine, don't just sit there. Help me," Kay said as she bustled out of the room, her arms filled with Tyrone's clothing. "Don't make me call you twice."

Sunny bent over and kissed Tyrone on the nose before jumping off the bed to follow her mother. Tyrone watched her leave, all hope of reasoning with her, pleading with his eyes to take pity, set him free going with her. After the two women were gone, Jonathan and Markie converged on the bed.

Jonathan peered at Tyrone with blatant curiosity. "How old you think he is?"

"Dunno," Markie answered, gnawing on a hangnail.

"He's pretty big, huh?"

Markie grunted in agreement.

"Y'know, Timothy Buchs says that he read in some magazine down at the 7-Eleven that in Japan they massage their cows so the fat is all even on their bodies."

"Uh-uh," Markie said around his fingernail. "No way."

"Yeah, they do!" Jonathan placed both hands on Tyrone's belly and began to work his fingers into the fat. Tyrone moaned, those dirt embedded appendages rummaging through his flesh making him nauseous.

"They massage the cows every day. This way the meat ain't too fat and it ain't too lean. Marbleized, they call it." He rolled Tyrone's stomach around like a mound of dough. "He's got good meat on him."

"And you're gonna bruise it all up, mauling him like that." Kay entered the room holding a toilet brush and some towels. "Now go get the wheelbarrow."

* * *

Tyrone thought he was on the verge of gagging. The tennis ball in his mouth smelled foul and loose hairs were adhering to his tongue. He tried to roll the ball free, but it was lodged between his teeth. He breathed deeply through his nostrils and the odor of the fuzzy ball made his stomach rebel.

He heard a metallic squeal, rhythmically bleating, like ancient clockwork. Jonathan rolled a rusted wheelbarrow into the bedroom. Markie came up behind him, a ring of keys in his hands. Kay and Sunny followed. Sunny had a plastic bottle of dish detergent in one hand and bottle brush in the other. In addition to the things her mother already carried, Tyrone noted that she had picked up her husband's gun.

"Be careful with him, Jon. I don't want him getting all beat up."

Markie unshackled Tyrone's left arm and pulled it across his chest to meet his right arm. The muscles were so stiff, Tyrone could barely feel it. It was a dead weight. Together, Jonathan and Markie chained Tyrone's wrists together. They did the same to his ankles, grunting as they hauled his heavy leg over the other.

Markie positioned the filth encrusted wheelbarrow next to the bed. The nostril clenching feter of manure drifted up towards Tyrone's face. For a moment his eyes fluttered and he became light headed. Jonathan rolled him into the bucket of the wheelbarrow and held him in place as Markie backed it up.

Laughing like children, the two brothers wheeled Tyrone out of the bedroom into the kitchen. Sunny and her mother tramped behind the little procession as they rolled out the back of the house into a barren dirt yard. The brightness of the waning sunlight was nearly blinding

in contrast to the dimly lit shack. Tyrone gaped wildly at what seemed like miles of empty muddy land. His heart hammered in his chest as a feeling of despair washed over him. Without warning Markie tipped the wheelbarrow and dumped Tyrone onto the ground.

"Watch it!" Kay shouted.

Tyrone twisted his body in the dirt, trying to see what was happening. Sunny was standing over him, staring into the setting sun. Markie stood the wheelbarrow up against the back of the house. He bent down and began to undo Tyrone's restraints. A shadow fell across Tyrone and he jerked his head as Jonathan grabbed him by the shoulders, forcing him onto his stomach. Tyrone gasped, sucking at the tennis ball. He started to cough.

"He's gonna throw up," Sunny warned.

"No, he won't." Jonathan pressed his knee into Tyrone's back, making him lie flat. "He's got plenty of room in there to breathe." He straddled Tyrone like a horse and patted his face with both hands.

"Get off him, you big moose!" Kay shooed him away. Jonathan grinned and dismounted.

The woman handed over the shotgun to Markie and hunkered down next to Tyrone. She began to run her wiry hands over him. Tyrone clenched his eyes shut in shame. A flash of memory intruding his misery and saw himself at the age of eleven, his mother still insisting on bathing him, her hands lathered rubbing his naked body. Kay slapped him sharply on the rump, making his buttocks jiggle. He heard Sunny giggle from somewhere above him.

"He is perfect! Not too old; not too young so you feel bad either." Kay ruffled Tyrone's hair. "Nice size, too"

Tyrone heard the sound of footsteps trudging towards them and his eyes flew open. Markie had dragged the rubber hose over. The shot gun hung from his other arm, tracing a path in the dirt. The hose was thin and shiny and had sprung leaks in several places. The nozzle was an old metal spout that needed to be twisted to turn it on.

"I opened the pump. You're all set." He offered the dripping nozzle to his mother.

Kay snorted. "You're going to handle the hose. Sunny and I'll scrub."

The boy shrugged and dropped the gun into the dirt. He pointed the nozzle at Tyrone's back. A shot of cold water shocked his naked skin. Markie doused him good, running the hose over his body, drenching his hair.

"All right, that's enough," Kay said, and she grabbed

the bottle of dish detergent out of Sunny's hands. She allowed a trickle of the pearly soap to dribble onto Tyrone, forming a puddle in the small of his back. With the toilet brush, she began to scrub his skin raw.

Tyrone howled and bucked. Both Markie and Jonathan dropped to their knees and held him down. Sunny ran over and knelt in front of him, cupping his face in her hands, shushing him. He could smell his own cum on her face.

"He's all right," Kay said. "You get so damn attached, Sunshine."

"I know," Sunny said, squeezing his cheeks. Fresh tears bubbled beneath Tyrone's clenched lids.

Kay continued to scour his body until his flesh burned all over. Markie hosed the soap off and he and his brother turned Tyrone onto his back. The process repeated itself, the nylon bristles nibbling at his skin, turning it pink. After they hosed him off again, Kay picked up the bottle brush from where Sunny had discarded it. She ordered them to turn him back on his stomach.

She grabbed one of his buttocks and pulled it to one side. Tyrone felt the tip of the plastic container touch his rectum. He squealed with outrage. He heard the rude sound of the plastic bottle being squeezed and felt the cold squirt of liquid injected into his bowels. In the next second the sharp bristles of the bottle brush being thrust between his buttocks catapulted him between the two young men holding him down.

"Whoa!" Jonathan yelled, latching onto a handful of Tyrone's hair.

Tyrone bellowed, his shouts muffled by the tennis ball. He wrenched his body like a fish, lurching in one direction then the other. They held him down as best they could, Markie nearly sitting sidesaddle on his back. Kay pulled the brush free and Tyrone tried to squirm away. The boys yanked him back in place.

"Give me the hose," Tyrone heard the woman say. The cold metal nozzle was inserted into his butthole and icy water jetted into his colon.

A paralyzing numbness rode up Tyrone's thighs into his back and chest. He foundered in a puddle, dropping from exhaustion. His entire body had gone cold. The tennis ball in his mouth hit the ground, propping his face up out of the mud.

Kay plucked the hose out and turned the nozzle off. She examined Tyrone's flesh.

"We can hose him off again before you take him to the

barn.” she said.

“What’s the hold up here?” a voice from behind them asked.

Jonathan quickly got to his feet and Tyrone turned his head slightly. Albert was standing over them wearing a leather apron spattered with rust colored stains. In one hand he held a sharp hook with a wooden handle.

“I’ve been waiting for what seems like forever in there,” Albert said. He gestured with the tool he held in his other hand, a long thin knife.

The sight of the sharp blade glinting in the sunlight set fire to Tyrone’s exhausted brain. He erupted into violent motion. Rocking onto his side, he tossed Markie off his back. Grabbing Jonathan by the leg, he pulled the younger man back, hauling himself up like a monkey. The mud slipped under him, but he trod right onto Jonathan, leaving black footprints across his chest.

“The gun! Where’s the gun!” Albert was shouting. He spotted where the gun had been left lying in the mud and dove for it. His boot slid across the slippery clay and sent him sprawling.

Markie tried to pull himself up, but his hands slipped under him, losing their grip in the mud. He fell across his brother’s body, the two tangling together. Sunny shrieked, clawing at her mother helplessly.

“Get him, Daddy! Don’t let him go!”

Tyrone managed to escape the mud and ran around the side of the house. The dirt was clotted with patches of grass there and he was able to maintain his footing. He ran naked, his flaccid penis flopping against his belly. His feet tangled in something as he reached the driveway. A shoe flew past him as he dropped to his knees and he recognized his own clothing Kay had taken away.

Tyrone pried the ball from his mouth. His jaws felt like bands of metal. He grabbed his pants and kept running. He heard shouting from behind him. He kept his eyes on the empty spaces ahead of him, his heart pounding in his ears as he ran.

He tore down the driveway, turning up the dirt road. At any moment he expected to feel the grasp of hands on his shoulders. His legs pumped wildly and he dodged into the bramble on the side of the road. He didn’t stop until he had pushed past the thicket and was well concealed by the autumn foliage.

Thorns and vines ripped at his bare thighs as he worked his way into the brush. For what seemed like hours he ran until his legs became leaden. He could see the back

of a house up ahead. It was another poorly constructed shack, but in his eyes it was a sanctuary. He willed his legs not to fall off, his lungs not to burst until he reached that little house and the safety of others.

His ears strained for the slightest sound of pursuit from behind him. He stopped short of the bushes surrounding the house and paused long enough to struggle into his pants. Bending forward to guide his feet into his pants’ legs, he nearly collapsed, blackness swallowing up his sight. His lungs heaved, thirsty for air and he leaned against a tree for support.

When he was certain his heart wasn’t going to explode out of his mouth he jogged up to the house. The back of his neck prickled with anxiety. He kept glancing over his shoulder, expecting to see the entire family behind him, blades and scrub brushes in hand, hungry grins on their faces. His mouth had gone cottony and he was afraid to call out for help. The sound that might escape would sound like a maddened animal.

Cautiously, he circled the house. A large boned old man in dungarees and a T-shirt was sitting on a cylinder block porch. He looked like the mummy of a giant, propped up on a beach chair, tiny round rimmed glasses pressed into his wrinkled face. A listless cat lay across his lap. At the sight of Tyrone, the old man stopped stroking the cat, his eyes squinting from behind his spectacles. He pushed it off his lap and stood up.

“Gotta help me, please,” Tyrone panted. He knew he looked bizarre, standing in front of this man’s house, his chest exposed, no shoes, wet hair. He thought he must have looked like a lunatic.

“What happened?” the old man said. He took a few steps closer to the screen door as he regarded Tyrone.

“These people are after me, they tied me down, they --.” He stopped. The words were backed up in his throat. He swallowed hard, his eyes silently begging with the man, “please don’t make me say it.”

“Come on in inside.” The old man’s voice was hoarse. He shuffled to the side, opening the screen door for Tyrone.

“Rita,” he called into the house. The interior of this shack was far nicer than the other one. It was neater, cleaner with newer things. There was real furniture in the rooms. All the trappings of poor, but normal people. The couch looked particularly inviting to Tyrone.

A tiny woman in jeans and a sweater tiptoed into the room. She stared at Tyrone with wonder. Her small face

was like a shriveled apple beneath a halo of silver curls. Tyrone wanted to kiss her.

"Rita, this man is in trouble." The old man closed the door behind him.

"Do you have a phone? Please say you have a phone," Tyrone asked.

The old woman looked up at her husband. He nodded, "Sure, we've got a phone."

"Thank God." Without asking, Tyrone slumped down onto a wooden chair by the wall. "Oh, thank God."

"I'll get it for you," the old man said. He slipped past Tyrone and disappeared into the next room.

The woman stood next to Tyrone. She smelled like flour. The whole house smelled of baked bread.

He rubbed his face, his fingers trembling.

"Thank God," Tyrone said again, unaware he was even talking. "I was so scared. I didn't know where to run."

"It's all right, now," she said. She reached out with her tiny hand and rubbed Tyrone's stomach. "We'll take care of you."

Tyrone looked up. He saw the old man standing over him and the smiling old woman as she stepped back. He saw the bottom of the cast iron skillet as the old man brought it down on his head. He saw nothing else after that.

* * *

Rita pinched the two flaps of skin together and drew the needle through once more, knotting the ends of the thread together. With a pair of tin scissors she snipped off the ends. She had packed better than two pounds of apple stuffing into his paunch and she wanted a strong seam to hold it all in place. It had been a big cavity to fill, but at least she knew there'd be plenty of stuffing to go around. Selecting a large apple from the bowl on the table, she wedged it between Tyrone's teeth. She smoothed his lips down over the edges neatly and then stepped back to admire her work.

As Rita was about to place the heavy cast iron cover on the roasting pan, the kitchen door swung open. Her husband came in from the cold with some wood for the stove. He shrugged out of his jacket and joined her at the table.

"Hams are in the smoke house and I've got the fire going in the pit." He grabbed an apple and bit into it. "You all set for me take him outside?"

Her eyes widened and set the hefty cover to the side. "I almost forgot! Give me a second!"

She dribbled a handful of corn oil into her palm and rubbed it over the pale skin, massaging it between his buttocks and beneath his chin. Her husband watched her, a proud smile spreading across his face.

"Nice to have the whole family for Thanksgiving, isn't it?"

She patted Tyrone's wide back and nodded.

"Nice to have enough food to share with them."



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